

ARIANA NASH

THE BLACK PRINCE

BLOOD
ICE

IRON
FIRE

SILK
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ARIANA NASH
BOOKS 1-3



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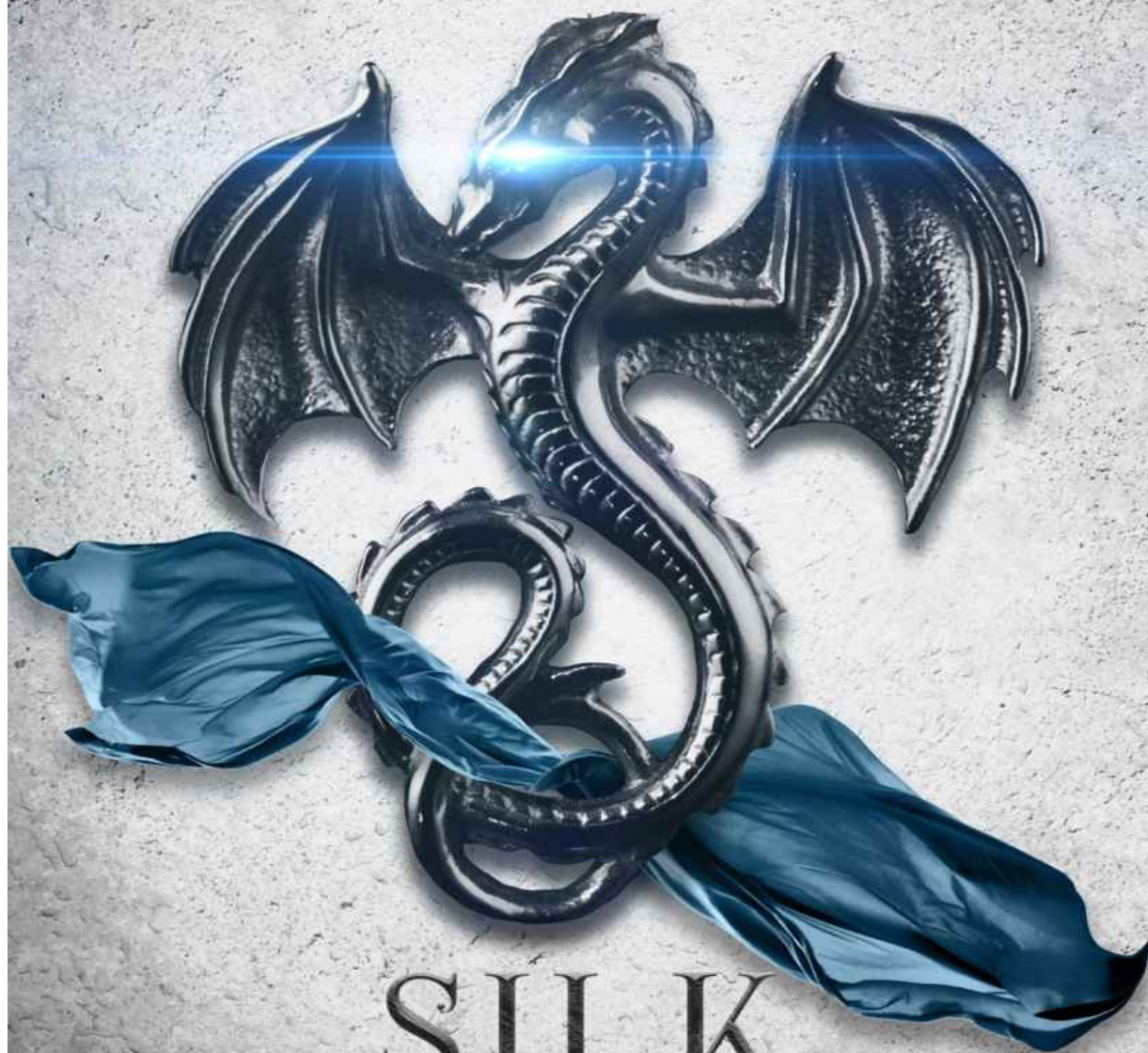
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ARIANA NASH

FIRST IN THE SILK & STEEL SERIES

*Duty demands they fight for their people.
Love has other plans.*



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The m/m dark fantasy romance between the two main characters develops over three books.

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LOST

This land lost its name,
When the dragons came.
In fire and ice and pain,
They spread their reign.
Buried and forgot,
Cities fell to rot.
Now there's nothing left,
For us elves to protect.

— ELVEN FOLKSONG

CHAPTER 1



Eroan

THE IRON DOOR rattled on its hinges and groaned open, spilling silvery light inside. Gloom fled to the corners, leaving behind a figure with broad shoulders. *Male*, Eroan thought. Curious scents of warm leather and citrus tickled his nose. After the wet and rotted smell of the prison, he welcomed any change in the air, even if it meant his visitor had returned.

Eroan kept his head low and his eyes down, hiding any signs of relief on his face. The shackles holding his wrists high bit deeper. He'd been so long in the dark, he'd almost forgotten he was a living thing. The constant, beating pain was a cruel reminder. This visitor was a cruel reminder too.

He knew what happened next. It had been the same for hours now. Days, even.

The male came forward, blocking more light, lessening its stab against Eroan's light-sensitive eyes. He turned his face away, but the male's proud outline still burned in his mind. Other images burned there too. The male's half-smile, the glitter of dragon-sight in his green eyes. Eroan had rarely gotten so close to their kind without killing them.

His mission would have been successful if not for this one.

"You need to eat." The male's gravelly undertone rumbled.

He needed nothing from *him*.

A tray clattered against the stone floor. The sweet smell of fruit turned Eroan's hollow stomach.

Moments passed. The male's rhythmic breathing, slow and steady, accompanied the scent of warm leather rising from his hooded cloak, and with it the lemony bite of all dragonkin. A scent most elves were taught to flee from.

"Were you alone, elf?" the dragonkin asked. The questions were the same every time. "Will there be another attempt on her life? How many of your kind are left in our lands?" More questions.

Always the same. And not once had Eroan answered.

Steely fingers suddenly dug into Eroan's chin, forcing him to look, to *see*. Up close, the dragonkin's green eyes seemed as brittle and sharp as glass, like a glance could cut. His smile was a sharp thing too.

"I could torture you." The dragonkin's smile vanished behind a sneer.

Eroan's straining arms twitched, and the chains slung above his head rattled against stone. *He has me in body, but not in spirit.* He gave him nothing, no sneer, no wince, just peered deep into the dragonkin's eyes. Eyes that had undoubtedly seen the death of a thousand elves, that had witnessed villages burn. If they had souls, this dragon's would be dark. *He could torture me. He should. Why does he wait?*

Eroan recalled that cold look when their swords had clashed. He'd cut through countless tower guards, severing them from their life-strings as easily as snipping at thread, but not this one. This one had refused to fall. This dragonkin had fought with a passion not found in the others, as though their battle were a personal one. Either he truly loved the queen he protected, or he was a creature full of fiery hate that scorched whatever he touched.

The dragonkin's fingers tightened, digging in, hurting, but just as the pain became too sharp, he tore his hand free and stepped back, grunting dismissively.

Eroan collapsed against the wall, letting the chains hold him. Cold stone burned into raw skin. His shoulder muscles strained and twitched. Pain throbbed down his neck too, but he kept his head up, kept it turned away.

"I cannot..." Whatever the dragon had been about to say, he let it trail off and reached for the ornate brooch fixing the cloak around his neck, teasing his fingers over the serpent design.

Eroan wondered idly if he could kill him with that brooch pin. Of course, to do that, he'd need to be free.

The dragon saw him watching and dropped his hand. "You do not have long, elf." His jeweled eyes glowed. Myths told of how the dragonkin were made of glass and forged inside great fire-spewing mountains in a frozen land. Not this one. This one had something else inside. Some other wildfire fueling him.

The dragon turned, sweeping his cloak around him, and headed out the door.

"What is your name?" The question growled over Eroan's tongue and scratched over cracked lips. He almost didn't recognize the rumbling voice as his own.

The dragon hesitated, then partially turned his head to peer over his shoulder. The fire was gone from his eyes, and something else lurked there now, some softer weakness that belied everything Eroan had seen. His cheek fluttered, an inner war raging.

The answer would have a cost, Eroan realized. He shouldn't have asked. He let his head drop, tired of holding it up, of holding himself up. Tiredness ate at his body and bones. The shivers started up again, rattling the chains and weakening his defiance. This dragonkin was right. He did not have long.

"My name is Lysander."

The door slammed, the lock clunked, and Eroan was plunged into darkness.

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CHAPTER 2



*H*e gave me a name. But more than that, he'd given Eroan thoughts to cling to in the dark. Lysander. He knew of him.

All elvenkind knew of the prince. But this prince was not the pride of the crown. That fell to the queen's other son. It seemed unusual that Lysander would be the one to visit and not someone more familiar with torture. That was assuming princes did not often visit the tower dungeons. Although, for all Eroan knew of dragons and their inner-ways, perhaps torturing elves was Lysander's duty.

Over and over, Eroan's thoughts tumbled in the dark. Better to think on the riddle of Lysander instead of the shame his own failure had brought upon the Order. By now, *his* name was a dead thing. His survival unimportant. Only striking a blow to the heart of the crown had mattered, and he'd failed. They had all failed. Should he somehow escape, he would still be dead to his own kind. Until the mission was done.

Pain beat through his jaw from grinding his teeth. Pain had long ago stolen any feeling in his arms, chained high enough that he could not rest without pulling open raw wounds. All he knew was pain, so that even the smallest of movements turned to wrenching agony.

When the door groaned open and the prince came again, Eroan's body had grown heavier, like this stone prison was swallowing him, making him a part of its walls.

He lifted his head, fighting the dull, thumping heat beating down his neck. Muscles shuddered, rattling his chains.

This time, the prince crouched in the middle of the chamber and set the food-tray down beside him. That same citrus and leathery scent had

followed him inside. Eroan breathed it in, letting it cool his throat and sink deeper into his lungs. After breathing in the stench of his own making, he welcomed the swirl of fresh air.

The questions would begin now. Questions about his people, their forces, on and on. But the prince held his tongue and a quiet settled.

Dressed in a tan jerkin and similar trousers, all laced at the seams with silvery thread, the prince likely believed he was hiding his lineage behind drab clothing, but his pedigree was in every stitch, in the shine of his well-worn boots, in the neat braid running the length of his dark hair, tied off with a band threaded with an emerald and pearl.

The prince picked something green and hard from the tray's selection of food and offered it to Eroan.

Even if Eroan were to surrender and take his gift, the chains meant he couldn't reach for it. The prince didn't seem inclined to bring it any closer and had no intention of freeing him, so Eroan ignored the food. And him.

The prince drew in a breath, bit down on the morsel with a loud crunch, and swallowed noisily. "It's good."

Hunger gnawed at Eroan's insides, twisting them into knots. In the fog choking his thoughts, he tried to recall the last time he'd eaten. Before his pride of elves had left for the tower. They'd camped on the border with the burned forest and shared stone-roasted rabbit. His mouth watered at the memory. Eroan licked his cracked lips.

"You should keep your strength up. You'll need it."

The words, curiously kind, drew Eroan's gaze. The prince's jeweled gaze wandered downward, roaming over Eroan's chest where it lingered a moment before flicking back to his face. "You're making things much worse."

Worse? How could it be worse? Cycles of planning. Lives lost in the pursuit of the information that had gotten him through the palace walls. There would not be another opportunity. This had been their last hope to stop her. The elves were too few and the queen too strong a force to be stopped. It could not get *worse*.

"I suppose you've heard of how we deal with thieves and assassins?" Finished with his snack, the prince brushed his hands together, leaving the quiet heavy with threat. "How we torture elves, keeping them alive for weeks, months even, toying with them as... *pets*." His smile turned cruel

and served as a reminder of how his current human appearance was one half of his being—the half that tricked and deceived.

Eroan had heard tales, seen the shredded remains of his Order brothers and sisters discarded along the borderlines, smelled dragon on them and heard the beasts' shattering roars. He knew what fate awaited him. He had known it since the day the Order had taken him in.

The prince rose to his feet and brushed dust off his fine clothes. "I should have killed you, it would have been kinder."

The sheathed dagger at the prince's hip glinted. He hadn't been without it during their meetings. When they'd clashed the night of Eroan's capture, blades sparking, the prince had been armed with two great curved swords the likes of which Eroan had never seen before. Those weapons had sung in the prince's hands. But now, reduced to a jailor, the prince carried only that small dagger. Why did he carry any weapons at all in his home? Decoration, probably.

I should have killed you... The prince's words sailed back to him, finally breaking through the fog. "Then do it," Eroan growled. "Take that dagger in your belt and cut my throat. End it now." It was a coward's way out, a moment of weakness, and Eroan winced, turning his head away, disgusted at his own begging tone. He should not want for this to end, not while the mission had yet to be done.

The prince settled his hand on the dagger and tapped his fingers on the handle, thinking it over. "A braver man might."

"Brave?" Eroan chuckled darkly. "How brave do you have to be to kill a chained elf?"

The prince's lips lifted, tucking the corner of a smile into his cheek. "Know so much, do you?"

"Enough."

"Of course, you elves know everything there is to know. Butchers, you call us. Beasts." He flicked his wrist, adding a flourish. "You're right, but you are not so innocent." He kicked the tray toward Eroan, spilling fruit and bread across the floor. "Eat or don't. It's of little concern to me."

The prince left and slammed the door behind him with enough force to shake free a cloud of dust. Where slits of light crept between the seals, the prince's shadow lingered.

He hadn't asked his questions, Eroan realized. He'd come with food and nothing else. What game was this? "Why do you come here?" Eroan

whispered, eyeing that closed door, examining every rusted bolt, every gnarled hinge in the foolish hope that the closed door wouldn't be the last thing he saw.

The shadows beneath moved and vanished, and Eroan was alone once more.



A FITFUL SLEEP wrapped him in jagged thorns and squeezed, jolting him awake to the agony of needles scattering across sore muscles. He blinked into the gloom and tried to remember what it felt like to feel the sun on his face. Just a little light... He ached to see it again, to feel some warmth.

"You've had enough time—" Unfamiliar male voices traveled beneath the closed door.

"You will get nothing from him." The prince. Eroan recognized that voice at least.

"He'll talk. They always do." A third, and the door lock *thunked*.

Three entered. The prince hung back while the other two approached, boots clunking. The one to the right smelled of wet metal and grinned like Eroan was a prize he'd been waiting for. "A fine specimen," he said, ragged voice slanted by a harsh guttural accent. His mop of dark hair half-covered his face, partially shielding one ruby red eye. The other shone an icy blue.

The third carried a flickering lantern and stood tall and still, keeping his distance. His clothes, like the prince's, appeared informal but had an unmistakably refined edge. Eroan studied that tall one, read the fine stitching, the familiar but bitter scent. His hair, currently tied back loosely with a leather band, was so black it looked like ink spilled over his shoulder. Lysander's brother, Prince Akiem. He had to be.

Eroan's heart spluttered, trying to dump adrenaline into his veins for all the good it would do him. The shivering started up again, rattling his teeth together. He hated this, hated that he appeared weak, hated that they had reduced him to a thing in chains. That hate stirred his blood and drove rods through his legs, lending him the strength to stand. The room tipped, Eroan's vision blurred, but he saw Akiem raise a single dark eyebrow and that small thing felt like a victory. *See me, notice me, understand who I am and that you cannot break me!*

The older prince nodded, and Red-Eye lunged.

A rough hand burned over Eroan's ribs, another scorched his hip. The chains jerked, hauling him higher, onto his toes. Fiery agony lashed down his back, forcing seized muscles to contract. All of it at once sent the room spinning. Every touch burned like a brand. He locked his teeth together to keep from crying out, but a groan slipped through.

Red-Eye's hand closed around his throat and squeezed. The dragonkin's wicked, snarling face filled Eroan's vision. Skin rough. Teeth sharp. His metallic smell laced Eroan's throat. "Let's start with a name, elf."

Eroan bared his teeth in a snarl, but all it bought him was a punch in the gut, throwing him forward into Red-Eye's rough-handed embrace. Red-Eye muscled him back against the wall. Eroan's gut heaved, ejecting nothing. He coughed, wheezed, fighting for air to fill him again.

"There's a pretty elf," Red-Eye caught his jaw and hissed his next words against Eroan's lips. "You and I are going to get real close..."

This one was the kind he'd been expecting from the beginning. The only surprise was how long it had taken the dragonkin to reveal their claws.

Eroan tried to tear free from Red-Eye's grip, but his fingers dug into Eroan's cheeks, cutting the inside against his teeth. Eroan tasted blood. Heat and fire and pain beat through him like a drum, over and over, but he would not give this beast the satisfaction of hearing him whimper or beg or cry out.

The tip of a blade trailed down Eroan's neck, over his collarbone, sinking deeper as it reached his left pectoral muscle. Their gazes locked, even as Eroan trembled. His body was a tool, the physical pain, temporary. This would end. Red-Eye could cut him, it changed nothing. They could never take his spirit.

"A name," Red-Eye purred, his breath dank with stale mead. "There's no harm in giving us your name, now is there."

The blade-tip burned its way through Eroan's skin, sinking in. Blood trickled, cooling as it dripped. He felt it all, but his stare continued to drill into Red-Eye's. Wicked glee sparkled in the dragon's mismatched eyes. This was the beginning, the beast's gaze promised, and the journey would be a long one.

Eroan bared his teeth in a spiteful grin.

"You won't get it." Prince Lysander's voice broke through the madness. The prince watched from his position near the wall, by the door, behind

Red-Eye, his gaze shallow and bored. “He’d rather die. Just for a name.” Lysander picked at a nail.

Red-Eye chuckled. The sound of that laugh crawled beneath Eroan’s skin and lit a flutter of fear. “He’ll die when I allow it. Leave, prince, if you do not have the stomach for it.”

Lysander sighed and pushed off the wall. “Do what you will, this foolishness is a waste of my time.” He waved a hand, dismissing them all, and left through the open door.

Eroan skipped his gaze to Akiem. The older brother regarded Lysander’s departure carefully, until he was out of sight, then turned his attention once more to Red-Eye. The older prince had an iron-coldness about him as though he wore unseen armor. Like nothing could touch him. *Nothing* had in all the decades he’d been alive. And nothing likely would...

Strength bled from Eroan, a drip at a time.

“Inform me when you’ve made progress,” Akiem said.

“And Lysander?” Red-Eye asked, pulling back to admire the rivulets of blood running down Eroan’s chest.

“He won’t be coming here again.” Akiem set his lamp down, left the chamber, and closed the door. The lock clunked like the fall of an executioner’s axe.

Orange lantern light danced over Red-Eye, making shadows crawl across his face. His smile was a hungry, lurid thing, like the beast it belonged to. “You’ll tell me your name, elf, if I have to cut it from your lips.”

He ran his tongue across his teeth and slowly, carefully, pushed his blade between Eroan’s ribs.

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CHAPTER 3



Lysander

“HE KNOWS NOTHING,” Lysander said. “Their assassins never do. He’s a tool.”

“*It*,” his mother corrected. “They are objects. Nothing more.”

Lysander gave her a blank look, one he’d mastered long ago. She returned with a glare, which must have taken effort while the males of her harem licked and suckled their way along her body.

She lay propped on her side among a bed of silks and satin while the males writhed around her, tending to her in almost every way. Had Lysander not been present, they’d be fucking her in every crevice and hole they could find. If the prince stayed too long, his presence wouldn’t be enough to deter them. That was his dear mother’s spell, one that didn’t work on him. Not that it mattered. She had many ways to fuck him over without using her body.

“*It* knows nothing,” she added. “The elf will be dead soon enough. Let us talk of more pressing matters. Our alliance with the Bronze needs addressing. His promises are all air and whispers. I need commitment if I am to have his armies under me.” Lysander’s mother trailed off as she noticed his gaze had wandered. “You like that one?” she asked, nodding at the male pressed against her back, sucking at her neck. Warning embers flashed in her dark eyes.

Silently cursing his own foolishness, Lysander looked up, anywhere but at her, at them. “No, Mother, I—”

“No?” she sat up, peeling her harem off her one by one. Doe-eyed and amiable, they fell away, sexed-up and drunk on her scent.

She rose gracefully from the bed, stunning in her nakedness, draped in a dark lace gown. Smooth black hair poured over her shoulders and tumbled over her milk-white breasts. On the bed, her puddle of males fell upon one another, tongues licking, hands stroking.

He knew his mother’s games well enough by now to know she had summoned him here precisely because this display would get under his skin.

Lysander’s heart galloped. The situation was rapidly unraveling, and she had hold of his strings.

She strode toward him like a storm poured into female form. As *dragon*, she was a monstrous force. As queen, she was worshipped, admired, loved by all. All but those who truly knew her. Those like Lysander.

She paused beside him, her heady scent working to soothe his runaway thoughts. Even as her blood-brood, he couldn’t escape all her spells. She studied him, her lips lifting in a curious smile. She lowered her hand, found his hardening arousal through his trousers, and pushed her palm in, dancing his desires toward the edge of pain. “Hmmm,” she purred in his ear. The sound was meant to be a comforting one from his time as a kit in the brood. These days it chilled his blood.

Fighting it did nothing. Fighting *her* did nothing. A heady mix of fear and lust swirled through his thoughts, turning them inside out. The more he feared the result of his own desires, the more those desires strummed through him. He wanted to back away, to flee this room, flee her, but a larger part of him wanted to stay, wanted this to happen, wanted her to fuck him, for her harem to fuck him and him them. If he even hinted at how dark his desires went, her punishment would be swift and severe.

She turned and crooked her finger at the blond, pulling him from the harem’s affections. He came forward, as naked as the day he first learned how to tuck his wings away and take human form. Long, golden hair stroked his broad shoulders. His clear strength of body declared him prime breeding stock. Of course, Mother would have nothing less than perfection in her bed. These males were bred to breed, over and over, and the blond looked as though he liked nothing better.

Lysander imagined how his tongue might swirl in that sensitive spot between his shoulder and collarbone, how he might make the male arch beneath him.

The tip of the blond's tongue found the corner of his mouth at the same time as his hand cupped his own erect shaft. His thumb lightly brushed over the tip. Unbidden, Lysander sucked in a breath.

Mother leaned closer. "You disgust me." Her purrs turned sharp and her words to venom. "How am I supposed to breed from you?" Her hand found Lysander's arousal again, discovering how he'd further hardened. She squeezed, sending a painful, pleasurable shudder through Lysander. "You will couple with a bronze. One of my choosing."

Her hand massaged, but it wasn't her hand he was thinking of. The male stood before him now, cock gripped, hand slowly working himself from the base to the glistening tip, his eyes on Lysander's, pulling the prince down and down, further into desire.

A twitch betrayed him. That and the very obvious erection his mother massaged through his trousers. She knew exactly how to arouse, how to bring him to the edge, but keep him from falling over.

"I'll make it so you will couple with the bronze heir," she said, "and you will fuck her until she drowns in your seed. Those brutes will be mine." Her hand shifted, stealing another small sound from Lysander. "If you can't do this, what use are you?"

The blond's eyes softened, pupils widening. Lysander imagined tasting his wet mouth, imagined diving his tongue in, gripping him hard and making him groan for him, even as part of him screamed to stop this madness. "Mother." His voice cracked. He gripped her hand, intent on pushing her off but stalling before the thought turned into action. "Mother, I cannot—"

Her hand snapped shut. Lysander's knees buckled, pain lancing through his balls. He'd have dropped to his knees if she hadn't caught his shoulder and held him up. "I'll rip your cock off, you sniveling broken kit. Do as I command it or I'll have you tortured and killed alongside that worthless elf you're so fixated upon."

The elf. The stubborn, stupid elf. There was something about him, something important, something at the back of Lysander's mind that wouldn't shake free since they'd fought outside the queen's chambers. He wasn't sure yet why he had returned to the elf time and time again, but there

was a reason. Perhaps it was more to do with Lysander than the elf, and why the prince had stopped the elf from killing the queen, a decision he was coming to regret. "Give me the elf," he gasped, blinking through tears. "And I'll couple with a bronze."

"What?" She blissfully released his cock and him.

He staggered but quickly caught himself.

"The elf? Why would you..." She smiled, interrupting her own thoughts. Something had occurred to her, some dark thought she liked the sound of. "I see." Turning toward the blond, she clasped him by the cock, prompting a pathetic mew, and steered him back toward the males on her bed.

Lysander looked away, toward the windows, and tried to fight the heat spreading through him. Need throbbed hot and heavy and wasn't fading. The desire was worse now she had her hands off him and on *the blond*. Vicious jealousy. The need to own, to hoard, to have. The dragons' curse. He ground his teeth, disgusted at himself, at her, at this fucking wreck they called a brood. She would not share them with him, not because she couldn't but because he was a broken, tainted thing and ever since she'd sensed that about him, she'd punished him at every turn.

She gently lay the male on the bed, pushing him back. The others had withdrawn to watch. Was Lysander the same as them, he wondered, something to be fucked and tossed aside by Queen Elisandra?

"I have not dismissed you."

He'd made it two steps toward the door before she'd noticed. Turning himself into rigid, unfeeling steel, he faced her and swallowed hard. She straddled the male, allowed him a moment to angle his cock so she could take all of him in, then she rocked, riding her male specimen, looking every part the queen determined to claw her way to the top by any means, and if she had to do it by fucking half the male dragons in the realm and swelling the ranks with her twisted amethyst brood, then so be it.

Wrong.

So wrong.

"Watch how it's done, Lysander." She threw a smile over her shoulder, body rocking.

Lysander lowered his gaze from her joyous grin and settled it on the male lost to her. He gripped her legs, fingers denting her thighs, his face slack, eyes ablaze, succumbing to the pleasure she gave. He wanted the

blond under him like that. His fingers digging into *his* thighs. He wanted to rip him from her clutches and fuck him as she watched just to make her rage and scream. Make her see. She'd probably kill him afterward, but it might just be worth it.

Lysander's engorged cock twitched. She noticed him adjust his trousers, trying to lessen the pressure, and snarled a deep growl, sounding more dragon than woman. "Dare touch yourself, and your precious elf dies." Her words struck like whip lashes.

Lysander's upper lip rippled but his snarl was silent, and for the first time in a long time, the mental grip on his form shivered, threatening to collapse around him. She saw it all, saw his eyes blaze brighter, saw his skin shimmer, scales shifting, rattling, and she laughed her bitch-queen laugh.

She fucked the blond with Lysander watching because she could and because she knew he had no choice. His own twisted desires throbbed and needed and ached and all he could think was how he wanted his mother, the Dragon Queen, to suffer as he had his entire life.

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CHAPTER 4



Eroan

AS RED-EYE'S blade took its bites, Eroan buried his thoughts deeper, losing himself inside warm memories of home, where the air smelled of wet grass and the sun beat down, where Janna's laugh could lift any mood and Curan's scowl was an ever-present threat.

Red-Eye had stripped Eroan's clothes hours ago and set to work carving into his thighs. Cold, slick sweat chilled his skin, turning him into a shivering, weak thing. He hated it, hated the slippery feel of shame and disgrace roll over inside, but he held onto his words through every cut, through every one of the dragon's snarls, and that made him strong, made him powerful.

Red-Eye carved his marks on one thigh and now brought the knife in, close enough to Eroan's personal parts for the chill on his skin to become ice in his veins. Red-Eye's lascivious smile said it all. Eroan closed his eyes and tried to hide deeper inside himself, somewhere far, far away where the forest was green and the air clean.

Cold metal brushed his scrotum.

Door bolts rattled. Eroan snapped his eyes open as the door swung inward, revealing a slim, feminine figure wrapped in a purple, velvet cloak and cowl.

Red-Eye's knife was gone. Eroan fell forward, panting. A moment's relief. He'd take it.

Her sweet scent found him, a potent mix of floral and honey that tried to cloud his intent. His orders flew in, sharp and precise. *Kill her*. He'd know the scent anywhere, having found it so many times on the elven carcasses strung up along the borders. *Kill the queen*. His one reason for being here stood in front of him.

"Leave," she barked.

Her cowl hid her face, but there was no mistaking the authority in her words. No mistaking her.

Red-Eye whimpered. "It won't be long now—"

A deep, throaty growl rumbled from the woman. Red-Eye mumbled his apologies and scurried from the room, taking his bloodied knives with him.

He had left the door open.

Torches flickered in their hallway brackets, illuminating an empty corridor that snaked away. Eroan searched that space for others, for her guards or princes. Had she truly come alone? What trick was this?

Twisting his wrists, he tested the clamps, disguising the movement behind angling toward her. Pain snapped down his arms, but soon dulled to nothing behind the thoughts of how or why she was here.

The raw wounds at his wrists wept blood and had done for days. Blood that slickened and oiled his skin, blood he could use...

"My, my... You are quite the catch." She lifted her pale hands and lowered her cowl, revealing a breathtaking beauty difficult to define.

Elven artists had sketched her through the ages, tried to capture the testimony of any who had seen her and survived. Those artists had failed. No pencil could capture something as exquisite as her. Hair blackish-purple, the color of a furious storm, and eyes sparkling with intelligence. Power lurked behind that beauty. A power born of the old gods. A power none could deny.

"I hear you almost made it to my chamber. The closest of all attempts to kill me." Her words flowed like oil, smooth and slow and all-consuming.

Closer, she came. Her intoxicating scent sailed through his senses, trying to distract and disarm. He let his eyelids droop, let her see his fight drain away. Hours, days, weeks, cycles, he'd exposed himself to her intoxicating scent, building resistance so that when the time came, he could drive his dagger home with his eyes wide open. The time spent with those

she had killed served a second purpose too. As their bodies bloated and they rotted back into the earth, his hatred became a sword, his disgust became his armor.

“My son was the one who stopped you, did you know?” she asked.

He had known because her son had told him his name. She didn’t appear to know her son had been talking, however. Interesting. Another riddle. But one he couldn’t waste time thinking on. There was an opportunity here. *Until it is done.*

“Ah, yes. Your silence. The famous elven stubborn streak. You’ll take your silence with you to your death just like all the others. There cannot be many of you left, and still, you waste lives by sending your best to slay me?”

She moved close and dragged a fingernail down his chest, snagging on Red-Eye’s fresh cuts, watching Eroan’s face for a reaction. Her dark lashes fluttered delicately, belying the beast inside her.

Already, panting and shivering, he knew he looked like a wretched thing, and let her see how weak they’d made him. Let her think him beaten.

“It saves me having to wipe your kind out at least.”

His clamped wrist twitched. He hissed in, making sure to keep her eyes on his face and not allow her to see how the clamp was halfway over his thumb and knuckles—*almost free*. This was his chance. Likely, his last and only chance to end it.

“I see why he asked to keep you. There’s something to be said for elven males. Your goddess, Alumn? She has an eye for beauty...” Her touch deepened, roaming over his abdominal muscles, smearing blood and filth across his stomach. Her hand stroked lower, and her fingers found his limp member. An urge to buck and twist twitched through him. He held it back, even as her fingers squeezed, he stared into her multi-faceted eyes. In hundreds of years, no elf had ever been so close to her and lived.

“I’ve had lesser males than you in my bed.” She peered up through her long lashes. “Would you like that?”

He would have preferred death and the risk of condemning his spirit to Ifreann than serving in her bed or in any part of the dragon realms.

She saw the fire in his eyes and laughed, sweet, ringing laughter while turning away. “I’ve fucked elves before. You’re all rather... fragile but full of prideful fire. I suppose you found those I’ve discarded. I do try to give

them back after I'm done." She drifted toward the door, chuckling at her words.

He'd found them, buried them, prayed to Alumn for them. And to have the source of all that horror and heartbreak so close... His silence wasn't winning any ground. If she left, he might lose his only chance to strike. He needed a new tactic, a way to reel her in, to lure her close.

He whispered a string of words, keeping them soft, making them tantalizing.

"What was that?"

He spoke again, keeping the words too quiet for her to hear. All dragonkin were curious creatures unable to leave anything unexplored or whispers unheard. She couldn't resist.

Her eyebrows pinched in frustration. Returning to her spot in front of him, she regarded his prone, weakened state, wary, but a chained and broken elf couldn't be a threat to the mightiest of all dragons.

She leaned in, tucked her hair behind her ear, and listened.

"My name is Eroan Ilanea," he breathed, setting his name free. "I was forged in the fires of Ifreann, quenched in Alumn's maelstrom, for a single purpose... to kill the Dragon Queen."

He tore his hand free of the clamp and grabbed for her throat. Agony poured through his muscles, rendering his reach almost useless. His fingers sailed through her hair—so *close*. She caught his clumsy grasp and slammed his arm back against the wall. Bones shattered like twigs. Brittle, sharp agony blasted up his arm. He barked a cry.

Her knee jerked up between his legs. She wedged her forearm under his chin, trapping him against the wall. Her strength was a monstrous thing—bigger than her, more than this room could contain. A strength he had no hope of countering. The prince had been right. Eroan should have eaten, should have stayed strong for an opportunity such as this one. There would not be another. He would die here, in this moment, and he could think only of how his people would weep for another failure.

The queen's eyes glowed with delight. She grinned. "Oh, I like you, *Eroan Ilanea*. You're much too bright a thing for my son to have. Hm..." She ran the tip of her tongue over her top lip. "An elven assassin in my harem. A lesson for your kin, don't you think? And a fate I imagine you believe to be worse than death. Yes, that will do nicely."

Heated pain burned through him, but it meant little compared to the horror her words incited. He could not, would not, be her plaything. He'd take up the first blade he found and plunge it through his own chest before he allowed her to reduce him in such a way.

Until it is done.

But close to her, free of these chains... No elf had survived her for long. He could—*until it was done*—and the queen was dead by his hand. He would survive by any means. Survive her and kill her.

"I came here to offer you a deal," she said. "I planned to put you in my son's service to help satisfy his pathetic *needs*. You would get a second chance at life. But I see a better use for you now, my fiery elf, and perhaps Lysander will obey me with you at my heel."

The purring sound at the back of her throat set Eroan's teeth on edge. She ran her wet, warm tongue up Eroan's cheek, filling his head with her sweetness and magic. Disgust burned in his belly.

"I will kill you, Elisandra," he whispered. "You and your sons, and every dragonkin who crosses me." He knew she wanted to hear the words, to hear the challenge in them, the challenge in *him*, but not as much as he wanted to make them true. He would wreck her brood from the inside out, carve through them one by one until her tower and might crumbled from within its walls.

Her eyes widened, and the Dragon Queen laughed her silky laugh. "You'll try, elf. And you'll fail. As is the destiny of all elves who dare cross me."

She pushed off, and he dropped to his knees and hung from the one remaining wrist-clamp, his broken wrist useless and throbbing at his side, his body a naked, bloody wreck. Inside, wild rage burned and lashed and spat; a rage he knew how to sharpen into a weapon.

The Dragon Queen looked upon him with a triumphant smile on her lips, not knowing this was the beginning of her end. Not knowing *Eroan Ilanea* was the beginning of the end of all dragons.

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CHAPTER 5



Dragged from his prison, bound in new wrist and ankle shackles, and shoved into a dark, windowless cave, Eroan could do nothing to stop it happening. For a few numb, silent seconds he stood naked and shivering in the dark.

Something thundered behind glistening, wet stone walls.

He looked up and found a grate above. Similar to the one cutting into the soles of his feet. He had moments to wonder what those grates were for when a torrent of water poured in, slamming him to his knees. Shock stole his breath. Panic tore at his chest. He sunk his fingers into the grate and squeezed his eyes closed.

Just water.

He wasn't dying, but by Alumn, it felt like he was. The hard blast bit into countless cuts and poured over his skin, burning like acid. He gritted his teeth against the onslaught and just *breathed. In and out. In and out. Not dying.*

The water shut off, leaving him gasping and wretched. Old wounds had reopened, spilling streams of blood down his arms. His broken wrist beat in time with his heart. The water would have cleansed Red-Eye's work, clearing out any early infection. It was a good thing. *Yes, a good thing...* If he was being cleansed that likely meant he would be free of the prison and free of the unending darkness... *only to find a new darkness in her bed.*

The guards collected him and led him down internal corridors. Torches warmed his skin as he passed under them. But he ached to feel real light, sunlight. If he didn't see it soon, feel the living earth beneath his feet, all of this would be for nothing. He'd die as surely as a cut rose. Did they know?

Or hadn't they let an elf live long enough in captivity for them to realize how he needed the air, the earth, the light, to keep his heart beating?

The challenge of a spiral staircase almost dropped him to his knees for a second time. The guard's firm tugs on his chains kept him up and moving.

Shameful, weak, wretched. He would live with these feelings and use them, turn them into fuel for the fight. But only if he could feel the sun again soon...

"Get it healed up." The guard handed his chain over to the woman. Eroan blinked at her, wondering if she was real or something his mind had concocted.

She dipped her head and led him wordlessly toward a gaping fireplace. Fire licked and danced in the grate. With every step closer, warmth soaked into his skin, seeping into his bones.

"Not there," the guard grunted. He hadn't left, likely assuming Eroan would try to slip his shackles the first chance he got. He wasn't wrong, though Eroan doubted he'd get far, weak as he was. *Keep your strength up. You'll need it*, the prince had told him. He intended on taking that advice now that he was outside that horrid black hole.

"It'll be easier to work the wounds if it isn't shivering," his new chaperone remarked.

The guard grunted, and the female continued to lead Eroan toward the fire. Wood smoke and the fire's accompanying crackle had his thoughts sailing far away to where sprawling forests beckoned and the earth soothed. He clung to that memory of home, wrapping himself in its mental warmth like the fire wrapped him in its real glow. In his mind, he was free and running, and Janna was there, laughing at something he'd said or done. *Don't think about her.*

"Kneel." The woman pushed down on his shoulder.

Head bowed, he knelt in front of the hearth. Firelight washed over his naked thighs, thawing tight muscles.

"It's to be delivered to Elisandra clean and obliging."

"Clean I can do." Her hands roamed Eroan's shoulder but skipped over his back, avoiding where the wounds throbbed the worst. "Obliging? Well, that's up to it."

She set Eroan's chains down and left his side a moment. He heard water sloshing, bowls clanging, but his gaze stayed fixed on the chain's end. For the first time in days, he was untethered. Adrenaline tried to kick in

alongside his training, tried to jolt him off his ass and into motion, but all he managed was hastened trembling.

“It’s going into shock.”

A bowl clunked against the floor behind him.

He stared at the chain.

“Fix that too.”

“I’ll fix *you*,” the woman grumbled quietly.

“If it goes to the queen like that, I’ll see the sharp side of her smile and believe me, Carline, I’ll pass that straight on to you. So do whatever it takes. Get it clean and fixed and ready by the time I return.”

The sound of his boots thumped out of the room until Eroan heard only the fire crackling and Carline’s clothes rustling. Had this been the first night or the third, he might have taken the chain up and struck her with it. Anything to be free. But being free was no longer his purpose. Soon, he would be delivered to the queen and there, by her side, he would have the best chance of finishing her. His pride of elves had struck knowing it was likely their end. They had all died trying to reach her. Only Eroan had survived the queen’s last guardian, Prince Lysander. It had to be for a reason. Perhaps the divine Alumn was watching, keeping Eroan alive for when his time to strike would come. He could not run, and he could not fight. But he could wait.

Fingers or cloth touched his back, he couldn’t see which, but his skin prickled as though touched with a hot iron. He hissed and jerked away.

“I’ll do my best to minimize the pain. Here.” She held out a flask.

He looked at the flask, at her, and yearned to pour water over his tongue. Who was she? Wisdom and sympathy softened hard dragon eyes. She was a monster, they all were, but time had worn her sharp edges away. She didn’t smile, just looked blankly back at him. She no more wanted an elf here than he wanted to be on his knees in front of her. He took in the room behind her. Vegetables and breads adorned long counters. This was a kitchen of sorts. She was a housekeeper, not another form of torture.

He took the flask to the sound of chains clinking and drank before she could change her mind and snatch the flask back. Cool wetness touched his parched lips and slid across his tongue. It hurt, everything hurt. His throat spasmed. Water, or whatever poison she’d given him, came back up. He spat and wheezed. “*What is that?!*”

“Mead.” She wiped her hands on her apron and moved to stand behind him. “S’all I’ve got that’ll help with the pain.” She set to work, dipping a cloth in the water and dabbing near his right shoulder where the wounds weren’t as raw. Her fluttering fingertips brought the shivers to the surface of his skin. When she reached the worst of his back, he grabbed the mead and drank deep.

His gut heaved, his body rejecting it. He slammed the back of his hand over his mouth and kept the sweet wine down long enough so it might stay down.

“Once that mead’s kicked in, it won’t take long to numb you. I’ll get you some food once the worst of this mess is dealt with.”

She poked and prodded, dabbed and probed, tutted and mumbled, but after the third helping of mead, the pain lessened and Eroan fell into a dreamy daze. Her dragonkin hands were smoother than he’d expected. Not as smooth or as deft as elven hands, but she had some healer skill.

He took another swig of the mead and closed his eyes against the spinning. In all of this agony, he’d locked himself away. As they had chained him, cut him, none of it had mattered, he had guarded against it all. But here, naked in front of this fire, the wounds weren’t the worst of it. His mind, his spirit, those things were weakening, and without those parts of himself, he wasn’t even sure who he was anymore.

Eroan Ilanea.

Assassin of the Order.

His pride of elves had come to kill Elisandra.

Over and over he told himself these things, building them up like bricks in a wall.

He was not this wretched thing quivering on his knees. He was elven, proud, free, and strong.

“Easy there.” She plucked the flask from his grip, snapping him out of his reverie. “That’s enough of that on an empty gut. We can’t have you falling into the queen’s chamber, now can we.”

Mention of the queen rippled a snarl across his lips. Better a snarl than let the trickle of fear sink any deeper and undermine what little strength he had left. What horror awaited him in the brood bed?

His shattered wrist throbbed, a souvenir of his first meeting with the queen. It likely wouldn’t be his last.

Carline chuckled. "You have some fire in you yet, I see." She leaned in and set about washing his chest, wringing out her cloth, and changing the water when necessary. He watched her work, catching her occasional curious glances at his face. It was unlikely she had seen many elves up close. Elisandra was right, elves were few. So rare now Eroan knew of only one other clan in the valley. What did she see, this dragonkin female? A killer too? Or a worthless thing, a pet?

He breathed in her scent, marking her in his mind. She smelled of warm bread, mead and smoke, spiced with that now all-too-familiar dragonkin musk.

Her hand roamed lower, across his hipbone. He awkwardly brushed her aside, rattling the chains and setting his wrist on fire.

"Shy?" Her eyes crinkled with humor. "Don't be. She'll soon fuck that out of you."

He blinked. Carline knew he was to be a pet in the queen's bed? He had assumed it would be a secret, that he'd be kept behind closed doors. He couldn't imagine the queen revealing any intimacies with an elf to her brood, but then he knew little of how things worked inside these walls.

Carline frowned at his muddled expression. "I've been told to get you clean. If I miss a bit, it's both our hides she'll skin. So, let's not make an incident out of this and just get it done, shall we?"

He turned his left hand palm-up, keeping his broken-right from moving too much. "I'll do it."

"Very well." She handed over the cloth and watched him clean around his personal areas. The chains made the work awkward, and his broken wrist added to the struggle. When he tried to hand the cloth back, she clicked her tongue. "It will take more than that, pet." She wrung out the cloth and returned, diving her hand between his legs.

He had his hand around her wrist and her arm caught before considering how any defiance might be dealt with. His stare met hers, but she turned away first, taking her cloth with her. "I see you have pride, elf. You had better keep it hidden if you want to survive. Now let's see to that wrist you're favoring."

Survive? "Do you truly think I'll survive this?" The words came out harsher than he'd meant, but the tone was true.

Carline shook her head, more in dismay than answer, and dumped the bowl on her counter. She collected a bundle of bandages and

plucked some canes from where they supported her cooking herbs, and fashioned a small splint, then set about wrapping his wrist. He watched her hands move, sensing a little magic tingling through his skin, stealing away the pain. She *was* a healer. Her kind—a dragonkin who cared for others—were rare. As far as he knew, they didn't fix their weak, they ate them.

With the bandages fixed, she washed her hands, grabbed a bread roll and poured something warm and steaming into a food bowl and set the small feast down in front of him. "Eat before you throw up that perfectly good mead all over my kitchen floor." Straightening, she planted her hands on her ample hips and frowned like a disappointed mate. Was it wrong to like this female? It seemed his mind was trying to make a friend in this place of horrors. Only a fool would like his captors.

"I'm going to find you some clothes befitting of your build. I suggest you don't run. A naked elf won't get far in a tower full of hungry dragons."

He had considered it since the guard had left, but the chains and wrapped-wrist would slow him. That and how his head continued to spin. The mead had been deliberate, he realized. If he tried to stand, he'd likely fall before making it two steps. The thought of escape was a sweet dream. One he let go.

"No running?" she asked.

"No running."

After she'd gone, he devoured the food, only slowing when his insides cramped. The warm food and fire helped ease the trembling enough that he tried to stand. Stumbling, he staggered to the counter. Fruit, bowls, plates, a knife... He reached out but stopped. There was nowhere to hide it. Not yet. But once dressed, if he could steal it away and get free... If he could find the queen's chamber...

He staggered to the window. If he could place the part of the tower he was in, he could find the queen's chamber. Find her, kill her, and this hell would be over.

A dark landscape of stone parapets and towers glowed by torchlight outside the window. The forests of home were a long way outside the tower's grounds, beyond the crumbling, ancient steel monuments that clawed at the skies, beyond the sprawl or barrenlands. It had taken days to cross the barrenlands and more to reach the brood's tower. He tried the window latch, finding it locked. Just a breeze, that was all he wanted, to feel fresh air on his face and hear night's sweet song.

A shadow darkened the towers spires. One of the enormous beasts swooped in, its wingspan blocking out everything. It let out a shrill bark, announcing its presence. Eroan braced a hand against the wall and leaned closer. Somewhere far off, another of their brood replied. This one's armored scales shimmered like oil in the darkness, making it almost invisible. The wing beats, too, were virtually silent. It alighted, clutching the tower, throwing its enormous wings back for balance and settled there, scanning the distance. Searching for more elves to feast on, perhaps. Shaking its great head, it swung its gaze toward Eroan's little window and fixed him in its glare. Many believed dragons couldn't smile. On seeing Eroan, this one peeled back its upper lip, deliberately revealing rows of long, jagged teeth.

They were impossible to fight in their natural form, too big, too vicious, and too armored for any elven sword to pierce. Only in human form could they be killed. Eroan knew it was possible because he'd killed one before. But that one hadn't been like this one...

He stared back at the beast now. This thing and its kind had reshaped the world beneath their claws, torn up civilizations and buried them.

It turned its head away, and fixed one eye solidly on Eroan, marking him. He was a small thing, that gaze said, easily crushed. With a sweep of its wings, it took to the air, sending shudders through the tower's walls and rattling the window.

"Ah, that'll be Akiem," Carline said, returning. "Patrols every night. Anyone would think he had nothing better to do." She tutted again, clearly unimpressed with the prince, and set a bundle of clothes down on the end of her countertop.

Akiem. The older prince. The one who had unleashed Red-Eye on him. Anger and shame fizzled through his veins. He tried to watch him soar, but his outline had already vanished against the night sky.

"Now then, let's get you covered up and presentable."

She'd brought for him simple cotton clothes and leather jerkin. Common-wear, he assumed. The type found on house workers. He approached and picked up the jerkin—it reeked of dragon—and dropped it again.

Carline huffed. "Don't be expecting no fancy wear, this is the best I can do. She'll have you dressed to her whim anyway."

Dressed to her whim? He didn't want to think about it or what was to come. He held out his shackled wrists. "How do you suggest I dress while in chains? Should I magic the garments on?"

She arched her eyebrow. "I do believe you're feeling better, elf. But don't go thinking you can fool me into unchaining you."

It was a genuine question, though he had worded it in a way that had sparked something of a smile to her lips. "How do I get my arms through the sleeves? Tell me that."

Her eyes sparkled. "I don't know, guess you'd better figure it out." She turned away and set about rummaging through her kitchen, muttering to herself.

He picked up the shirt and turned it over, trying to decide the best way of getting his arms through the fabric when it slipped from his aching fingers.

Carline scooped the garment off the floor and shoved it into his chest. "You're more capable than you're letting on."

"Isn't it *your* job to make me presentable?" he asked. "Won't you fail if I'm not dressed?"

She snatched the shirt back, dumped it on the counter and grabbed a mallet. "My patience is not infinite." Grabbing his chains, she yanked him forward and smacked the chain with the mallet, narrowly missing his good hand. "Hold still." She tried again, putting enough force behind it to rattle his teeth.

"Wait—!"

On the third try, the chain cracked enough for her to pull the links apart, separating his hands. He still had the clamps weighing down his wrists, but at least he was able to move his arms independently—and dress.

"There, now get dressed and quit your complaining. And stop smiling, I'm not your friend, so don't go thinking it."

"Thank you."

"And don't thank me either. Neither of us is here by choice."

He dressed, gingerly shrugging the shirt and jerkin over his back, setting his wounds on fire again. The clothes pinched in places, but it felt good to be covered up again, like the layers could somehow offer protection. No boots, though. His feet stayed bare against cold stone.

"She has you working here unwillingly?" he asked.

Carline waved a ladle at him. “Don’t ask questions. If you’re feeling better, go stand by the fire and wait for him to return. Not another word, you hear?”

Despite the fire in her words, that heat didn’t reach her eyes. This old dragon wasn’t so hard a thing.

He watched her take a bundle of fine-beans and take a chopping blade to them. One, two, three. Her hands were quick.

“Can I help?”

“Help?” She eyed him, cleaver glinting. “What do you think would happen to me if it was known I had an elf *help* in this kitchen? Don’t be foolish, and don’t be offering to help anyone but yourself around here. You had it right before. Keep your mouth shut and obey the amethyst. Anything else gives them lashes to whip you with.”

She returned to her food preparation and Eroan to the fireplace, where he absorbed the heat while he could. She hadn’t seen him slip the paring knife up his sleeve and hopefully wouldn’t notice it missing until he was gone from her kitchen. It wasn’t much of a weapon but wielded precisely, it could kill as surely as any finely forged sword. He’d had a hunting knife just like it, but that had been taken along with all his other weapons when the prince had bested him.

Eroan only needed one weapon and one more chance to kill.

By the time his head ceased spinning and his wounds stopped their throbbing, the guard returned to escort him on. Eroan didn’t speak, didn’t bid Carline a goodbye, and she ignored his leaving. She’d likely forget about the elf in her kitchen by the end of the night, but he would remember her, the dragonkin who smelled of smoke and mead.

They walked until his feet had grown sore, roaming farther into the tower’s heart. One of the monsters roared far below, shaking the walls. He’d heard similar rumblings in the prison. Dragons returning from their patrols or the same dragon roaring out in triumph, pain or anguish. He couldn’t tell which. He’d heard the lower in status a dragon was, the deeper inside the tower it slept, all coiled together like snakes. But not the queen, she lived above them, in all ways.

The knifepoint dug into his wrist where it sat snug inside his wrist-bandage. Should he be searched again, they were unlikely to open the wrappings. If he was being taken to the queen, as the guard had earlier

suggested, then his chance to kill her might arrive sooner than he could have hoped. This time, he would be ready.

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CHAPTER 6



Lysander

LYSANDER COULD BARELY HEAR his thoughts over the disorderly gathering of bronze and amethyst dragons in the great chamber. Mother had dumped some eager bronze female in his lap early on in the celebrations and snarled encouraging words in his ear about fucking her the first chance he got. She wasn't *the* bronze, the one he'd agreed to couple with—that unfortunate agreement was currently being discussed at the end of the table, where Elisandra and the formidable bronze chief, Dokul, sat now. A brute of a dragon, all muscle and bulk. He was built the same as a man, too, like he could break the feasting table in two just by glancing in its general direction. His brood and Lysander's fell about and over each other, oblivious as to the real reason for this friendly get-together.

Lysander watched the bronze help themselves to their food and lead the lower-ranked amethyst into the shadows where they'd undoubtedly try to fuck them. Males and females both, the bronze didn't waste time sticking to the opposite sex. The more they could spread their ferocious seed the better. Lysander couldn't decide if he was openly disgusted or secretly aroused, and that only made this night worse.

"Stop scowling," Akiem said, dropping into the vacated chair beside him.

Lysander shifted in his seat. The bronze lower had stuck around, determined to stick her hand anywhere warm and inviting. He couldn't shove her off his lap without offending Elisandra, and if he did that here and now, she'd couple him with some hideous bronze monster out of spite. Like most things, he was stuck here doing as he was told and knew to make the most of it.

The lower slid across his lap and tried to perch on Akiem's thigh. His brother bared his teeth in a harsh smile, only exciting her more. She leaned forward, sticking her ass in Lysander's face and groped at Akiem's thigh, clearly not getting the hint. All the bronze got off on violence. *No* was the wrong thing to say to her.

"Go get us some wine," Lysander snapped.

She sighed and straightened, looking between them. "I'll do you both if you ask nicely." With that, she sauntered off.

Akiem watched her shapely rear sway. Her collection of strange barrenlands trinkets, metal hoops and rusted springs, jangled around her waist and ankle, advertising her wares. The jewelry was human detritus, left over from the old-world. The bronze had a pathological need to collect shiny shit. Their warren was apparently cluttered with mountains of it. If all went well tonight, Lysander figured he'd soon find out if that rumor was true.

"You fuck her," he told his brother, who continued to watch her.

"I would, if my own brood didn't keep me satisfied." He peeled his stare from her ass and fixed it on Lysander. "Is Mother watching?"

He flicked his gaze over his brother's shoulder and smiled. Mother was indeed watching. She had a face like thunder. Lysander mimed drinking and smiled to indicate her delightful female gift was coming back. "Always, brother," he said to Akiem.

"You screw this up, she'll kill you like she did Amalia."

Hearing that name dealt him a punch in the gut and almost tore the smile off his face. Guarded, he pretended to be interested in a small scuffle breaking out across the table. "You think I don't know that?"

"Can you..." Akiem trailed off.

"Can I what?"

"Can you couple with a bronze?"

Lysander laughed, mostly to hide the sharp twist of his lips. "Believe the rumors, do you? That I can't *perform* my duties?"

Akiem wasn't amused. He rarely was. "Do the bronze lower, right here," he hissed. "Nobody will say another word if they see it now. Better here than—"

"Fuck that." He wasn't some performing freak show. Where was the damn wine?

Akiem leaned closer, bringing his considerable power with him, making him seem larger than the man. Lysander met his brother's gaze, knowing what was coming. "The bronze couple in public," Akiem said, keeping his voice low. "It's a ritual to them. It proves the joining is consolidated. If you can't do it here, then how are you going to there, among them? And if you fail, Mother will not suffer the embarrassment. She'll instruct Dokul to kill you, probably during the act, if you don't *finish*."

Lysander winced. "Sweet nights, Akiem. I know!" He hadn't thought of much else since Elisandra had first made her intentions to breed-him-off clear. It was always going to happen anyway. She was right about one thing: If he couldn't produce amethyst heirs and strengthen her line, then what good was he? Amalia had refused Elisandra, and she'd died for her obstinacy.

"She didn't give you the lower for her skills in conversation," Akiem said. "You can bet the rumors have traveled beyond the tower. Prince Lysander, her broken son. Dokul is watching."

Tired of hanging on to his fake smile, Lysander let it go and eyed his brother. "Did she send you over here?"

Akiem looked away.

Of course she had.

The lower returned, jug in hand, and poured them both fresh drinks. Lysander took his and drank it all down, hoping it could fill the gaping hole inside him. Slamming the cup down, he stood, cupped the lower's ass and hauled her against his hip, making sure all in the hall got a long look. The lower melted close, already purring, and he knew for sure Elisandra was watching as he guided the lower away from the main hall. He had three options: fuck this lower, bribe her, or kill her. A bribe would come back to bite him in the ass. He'd tried that route before. Elisandra always discovered the lie.

The lower pawed at his arm, his back, and groped at his ass. He guided her into one of the outer corridors where the wind from the balcony arches fluttered the flags and flaming torches.

He could kill her, but without an alibi and with the whole hall having just witnessed them leave together, he was fucked anyway.

She was on him suddenly, a writhing, arching thing, warm and alive beneath his hands. Her mouth sought his, roaming across his jaw. He gave it to her, kissed her, feeling something of a spark shiver lust alight. If he didn't fuck her here and make it good, he'd suffer later.

She plucked his shirt free of his belt and pushed her warm hands up his chest, sweeping over his abs. She smelled of wine and metal, of all things bronze. He shoved her against the wall. Her jingling hoop jewelry chimed. Her wicked smile dumped a ton of lust where it was needed, making him hard. Thank the Great One for His gracious favors. Maybe he could get through this.

She yanked on his belt and palmed his cock through the fabric, purring her pleasure. "She said you wouldn't even get this far. She was wrong, huh?" Her thumb pushed in, pushing over his tip, spilling shivers through him, making his cock jump.

He braced an arm against the wall, hemming her in and tried to shake the rage her words had summoned. This bronze would tell his mother everything. Every word, every touch, wrong or right, hard or soft. All of it. This was a fucking interview.

He caught her jaw and held her locked in place. "You're to report back to her?"

She didn't answer but didn't need to. She grinned and ran the tip of her tongue over her blunt human teeth.

He had no choice at all now. And why was he surprised at that? After twenty-five years, he should have figured it out. His mother owned him. Fuck it, and her, he was getting this done and over with.

He kissed the lower's mouth, pushing hard, driving his tongue in. She writhed and purred. The bronze liked it rough. If he couldn't do it his way, he'd fuck her so hard she'd have no choice but to wipe the knowing-grin off his mother's face.

She fought with his belt, trying to unlatch it. He knocked her hand aside, parted her thighs and sank his hand into the V between her legs, finding her warm, wet and inviting. At least she was easy. Her hot little nub was an easy target too, turning her to liquid in his hands. He could pleasure her with his damn eyes closed. The problem wasn't her, it was him. The lust was fizzling away. There hadn't been much to begin with but knowing his

performance would be scrutinized was more than a mood killer, it could be a death sentence.

He slid two fingers into her. She clutched at his back and rocked her hips, then suckled his neck, nipped and dug her fingernails into his shoulder. And his mind started to wander. She was lovely to look at but... Fucking hells. Akiem could do this, so why couldn't he?

"What's wrong?"

Fuck.

"Nothing." He yanked his hand out, caught her hips, and ground his crotch against hers. C'mon already... He needed to find a way out of this, and fast. Needed to think of something, anything, that'd get him up. He imagined the blond from his mother's bed, imagined his narrow hips beneath his hands, his cock erect and straining between them.

Her hand found him again and stroked some hardness back into play. Pleasure sizzled low in his balls. All right, he could do this.

"You like that."

She sounded like his mother.

He threw his head back and swallowed a bitter laugh. He couldn't do this. "Turn the fuck around." He didn't wait for her to obey. He grabbed her around the waist and shoved her toward the balcony rail. She was pliable in his hands and eager, so eager. It would have to be enough. He yanked her skirt and those ridiculous adornments down her legs, exposing her ass and those sweet, welcoming lips of warm flesh. Spreading his hand on her back, he held her pinned down and freed his erection, waking the bastard thing up with a few rough strokes. *Don't think about Elisandra.*

The blond. Think about him. The blonde's cock in my mouth. Mine in his. His tongue...

"Are we doing this?"

He thrust in, as deep as the fucking thing would go, deep enough to make her quit asking questions and gasp. In his head, it wasn't her taking all of him. It was him, the blond bent over, his hands clutched at the rail, and he had him, his ass so fucking tight, the friction like a drumbeat in his head.

The lower writhed and grunted, punctuating each thrust. Sweet pleasure was building, coiling tighter and tighter, winding Lysander up. Gripping her hips in both hands, he lost his mind to the pounding rhythm, to the idea that he was fucking him, not her. But even then, he knew it was over before it

had really begun. She wasn't the blond. Her cunt wasn't what he wanted, and he was so fucked there was no way this was going to end well.

He pulled out and tried to hide his softening dick by working her clit from behind, making her come. He could do that, at least. She screamed her pleasure, but he wasn't fooling anyone. He couldn't even fake his own orgasm.

"We could try again..." She twisted and leaned against the balcony railing, thighs parted like an open invitation.

"Get out of here." He didn't even bother to tidy himself up and fell against the rail, gripping it like he could cling onto the pieces of a life about to fall apart around him.

She snickered, reached up, and planted a little kiss on his lips. "Maybe next time, prince."

Lysander knew he'd failed, and there would not be a next time.

He was done.

Mother would kill him.

He turned, propped a boot on the rail and leaped over the edge, into the dark.

Freedom.

Falling.

The wind bit and scraped his face and tore like hands at his clothes.

Down, down, down. Delay a second too long and it would be over.

His heart hammered, too much alive to throw it all away. He roared out all the anger, all the fear, the rage, and let the shift tear through him. His body breathed outward, magic and power suddenly free, filling him up, emptying him out, unleashing everything, remaking him into his true form.

He flung out long wings, spreading them so wide their sail-like membranes ached as they caught the air. The ground rushed in. Gravity clutched at his gut. He swooped over the rocks, closer than ever before, and soared high, breaking over the wide, winding river. Briny estuary air lapped at his scales. Another roar tore from deep inside. He opened his jaws and howled into the rushing wind. He could fly and not stop, could beat his wings until the muscles burned, until he couldn't fly anymore, and then he'd fall and maybe that time, that one last time, he wouldn't save himself.

He was dead anyway.

He didn't see her, not until claws sliced through his right wing. He rolled mid-flight, trying to shy from the pain. Amethyst scales flashed, her

roar thundered, and with gut-sick horror, he watched her sparkling jaws open wide. She struck, plunged her teeth into his neck and tore out some vital part of him. He kicked, raked his claws across her belly, at anything. Her wings beat, slowing their descent and her claws sunk in, digging deeper and deeper around his ribs. Crushing. Killing.

Elisandra lifted her head and bellowed a victory cry.

She let him go.

He tumbled, losing height too quickly. Searing pain snapped up his right side. He tried to fling out his wings, tried to find the horizon in the dark, but something was wrong—his right wing flapped uselessly. The night sky rolled, the ocean glinted, around and around they went. He couldn't catch hold of either and tumbled on, trying to claw at the air in a pathetic attempt to keep himself aloft.

He hit the river like it was stone and the bone-biting cold rushed in to swallow him down.

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CHAPTER 7



Eroan

THE GUARDS LEFT Eroan chained to a wall in what was clearly part of the queen's enormous bedchambers. Floor-standing candelabras chased the dark from the corners and made shadows dance across fluttering window drapes. If he hadn't guessed the room's owner from the plush furnishing, her smell confirmed it. No bed that he could see, although this chamber likely led to others. But at least he was being spared that torture for now.

Left alone, he tugged at the fresh leather cuffs on his wrists. They'd switched the chains for these lighter restraints, and while they didn't pinch and chafe like the chains had, the fact they were made of leather likely meant they weren't coming off anytime soon. Convenient, locking clips fixing his wrists and ankles to the wall-straps implied he might at least get moved around. The new leather collar around his neck wasn't attached to anything. Yet.

He had his paring knife, but until he knew what this new scenario was, he couldn't risk revealing his only weapon.

He was still testing his straps when the door opened and the queen breezed in, wrapped in a combination of purple gossamer and silk. Her hair had been bundled in neat curls. She brought with her the smell of dragon and wine and smoke... and another male...

The man who followed was built like a boulder with eyes just as cold as stone. An odd collection of metal rings and bracelets jangled from his neck, ears, biceps, and wrists. Eroan had seen similar items buried in the forest floor and often overlooked them. But not this dragon, he clearly preferred to collect. That would make him a bronze—they were known for their strange hoarding obsession. Perhaps, the bronze *chief*, considering his size.

“Sit, Dokul,” the queen said, softening the word so it sounded less of an order and more of an invitation. She took a jug from a shelf and poured something into two glasses, setting the first before the bronze as he made himself comfortable. Bare-chested, he wore one bronze pauldron at his left shoulder—for decoration more than protection—keeping his sword arm free to move. His hairless head was as smooth as his chest and an unusual sight. Eroan had never seen a hairless male before. He hadn’t even known such a thing existed.

Dokul lifted his glass, but as he saw Eroan, his golden eyes narrowed.

Eroan had two of the world’s fiercest dragons in his sights. A pity he was chained up, he could have struck a devastating blow to the dragonkin. He held the brute’s glare, making it clear he was not beaten, despite what the straps suggested.

“Their forces are building to the east,” Elisandra spoke, drawing the bronze’s attention back to her. “We must prepare.”

“I have it in hand,” Dokul rumbled.

“Do you?”

The bronze regarded Elisandra with a look laden with warning. “I remember when you were a fledgling fighting among your brood for scraps, Elisandra. I remember when all the jeweled ones were sprats playing the odds to survive in a chaotic world. Gold, Silver, and *Bronze*.” His chest swelled. “I am old enough to remember how the humans rallied their forces. Do not presume to know my mind or how to wage war. *I am war*.”

The queen’s smile sharpened without moving. She cradled her glass in her hands, appearing as though she was a delicate and obliging thing. It was an act. One Eroan doubted the bronze would fall for if he knew her as he’d said. She laughed softly. “And now I am queen. *Your* queen.” She let that sink in. Dokul sniffed and eased back into the chair, making it creak under his muscular bulk. As dragon, he had to be twice her size, and yet she held the power here. How was that possible?

“What do you think of our generosity?” Relaxing in the chair opposite his, Elisandra crossed her legs, making her silks slip at just the right angle to distract a male mind.

“Your brood is most accommodating,” he said with a genuine smile. “I would have agreed to come sooner, but preparations are consuming. You mentioned a coupling?”

“It is time Lysander set to creating his own brood.”

“Lysander?” Dokul’s brow pinched. He sighed and set his glass down.

“I know what you’re going to say. It’s been dealt with. He will obey. In every way.” For some inexplicable reason, the queen’s gaze skipped to Eroan but did so quickly enough the bronze didn’t notice.

“The rumors—”

“Rumors?” She laughed sharply. “He is amethyst. He’ll fuck what I tell him to.”

Dokul’s brow lifted. “And the lower’s report?”

“He deliberately failed to perform to undermine me.” She drank some of her wine and swallowed. “His mind is as sharp as his sword.”

“Just not the sword that counts?” the bronze laughed darkly.

“He has been disciplined.” Elisandra leaned forward. “His talent in combat is renowned. He stopped *this one*—” she swept her hand at Eroan “—single-handedly after all other guards failed.”

Eroan straightened under their sudden scrutiny. Their combined gazes drank him in and made his instincts itch.

“Didn’t kill him though?” the bronze smirked again.

“I forbade it. Otherwise, he would have. None can match Lysander in battle, dragon or man.”

Dokul arched his golden eyebrow.

“Besides me,” the queen purred.

“What say you, elf?” the bronze turned his attention to Eroan.

Eroan had a great deal to say, but much of it would likely get his tongue cut out. Carline’s earlier advice reminded him to keep his words to himself unless he had little other choice.

“He refuses to speak...” Elisandra was saying but trailed off as the bronze rose to his feet and crossed the room.

The knife hidden against Eroan’s wrist had adrenaline buzzing through his veins again. Two of the world’s most feared creatures stood within

striking distance. No elf in history had gotten this close, and yet, tied up, he was useless.

Useless, but for one thing. Words.

“Well?” the bronze asked, close enough now that his stench burned Eroan’s throat. The queen stopped beside him, her penetrating eyes narrowing.

Eroan lifted a shoulder. “I was tired. I’d already killed eight. Had he been the first I encountered he would have fallen like—”

Elisandra’s hand smacked across his cheek. Her nails, or a ring, cut in and zipped open his skin, dribbling blood down his jaw.

Dokul laughed deeply, and Elisandra’s lips twitched. “He lies,” the queen spat.

“Oh, I know,” the bronze grinned, revealing a discolored metal-capped canine tooth, and stroked his hand over his bald head. “I’ve seen Lysander fight. Tried to kill him once when he was a kit.”

Elisandra blinked, failing to hide her alarm. She hadn’t known.

He waved her off. “It was a long time ago, and he clearly survived. I’ve had my eye on him for a long time. He has great potential. With the right motivation.”

Elisandra’s mouth twitched again as though he had just insulted her. Did the bronze imply she could not give her son the correct motivation? It seemed Lysander was a weakness of hers. The bronze knew it. And now so did Eroan. If he could get close to the prince, that weakness might be further exposed.

Dokul squared up to Eroan. He smelled like warm metal, like racks of swords soaked in blood and it was all Eroan could do not to gag.

“There is some fire in you, elf,” the male dragonkin remarked. “I think you certainly did prove a fine match for the young prince. Had my guards been stationed at the queen’s tower, none of your kind would have breached the walls to begin with.” He turned away, allowing Eroan to breathe again. “Elisandra, you really must take my gift of a bronze flight.”

“It is not required.”

“It’s a gift. Gifts never are.”

The bronze wanted his flight in her tower, and it had nothing to do with protecting her. If Eroan saw that, so did Elisandra. The queen smiled her polite, courtly smile. “Let us return to discussions of coupling.”

He grunted. "I can do much with the prince. I do not need a coupling. I'll take him under my wing and remove him from your embarrassment."

"No."

Dokul gripped the back of his chair. Wood groaned. "You want an alliance, and you want control. Let us not pretend anything else is happening here, Elisandra. If he cannot perform, he'll weaken your line. Let us prevent that mistake. He need not die for your ambitions."

"No," she repeated. "There will be a coupling, or you don't get him."

The bronze folded his arms and glared at the queen. Wherever his thoughts were, his eyes darkened. Then, nodding quietly to himself, he jerked his chin toward Eroan. "I want the elf too."

"The elf is my pet."

Eroan sneered at them both, though neither noticed.

"If I am to lose a bronze to your attempt at spreading your amethyst line throughout mine, then I want a sweetener. We haven't seen an elf in decades. My brood would enjoy playing with that one."

Elisandra blinked quickly and smiled her thin, unassuming smile. "You seem to have forgotten your place. As your queen, I can order you do this with no counteroffer required."

She had something over him, something over all of them that kept them at her heel. It wasn't just her beauty. Even the mighty bronze cowered before her when she wanted him to. But why? Eroan watched every expression, heard every word, even the things unsaid, and learned.

"Then loan me the elf. No permanent harm will come to it, and I'll return it when we're done."

Eroan couldn't swallow his silence any longer. "I am not some beast to be traded!" He yanked on the straps, straining away from the wall. "I have a name, a life. I am Eroan Ilanea, Assassin of the Order."

Elisandra waved her hand. "Yes, yes. Born in the fires of some pit... I heard you the first time. But these are just words that mean nothing. Like you mean nothing, little pet."

"I can see why you have it here." The bronze's golden eyes flashed with malice. "It will be a pleasure to break him."

"Yes. And that pleasure is mine. He is not available. Take my son. Arrange the coupling. If he doesn't perform, kill him."

Dokul sighed. "Very well." He scooped up his drink, downed it in one and bowed his head. "My queen."

CHAPTER 8



Lysander

PAIN. Not even the wine chased it away, and Lysander had tried all the wine he could find. Forgotten how many bottles he'd finished, in fact. A few, at least. More bottles than he had fingers, and still the pain thumped through him. It wasn't the broken wing or the ribs that ached. Those wounds he hid behind his human form. Something inside ached and always had since his earliest memory. Like he was missing a part of himself. Sometimes he barely noticed it, other times he wanted to drink himself into a hole or take up a blade and cut open his veins to release the wretched pain.

This time...

This time he wanted to take a blade to *her*. Maybe the pain would go away if *she* went away.

He had his hands wrapped around the twin blades, welcomed their weight, their extension of his will, and found himself at his mother's receiving chamber before he'd realized he'd been climbing her tower.

He shoved open the door, stumbled, but righted himself quickly enough. *Too much drink*. Damn the drink. Damn the tower, its stairs leaving him breathless. Damn it all.

"Mother?" With the way his call echoed, he knew she wasn't here. Her presence filled a space, leaving little room for anything else.

The bronze, Dokul, had been here. He could smell him, smell the wine they'd shared, smell their scheming. Lysander wiped his sleeve across his mouth to try to wipe the taste of shame off his lips.

His gaze snagged on the elf and for a moment all thoughts of Mother scattered at the sight. She still had him bound, this time with thick leather wrist and ankle cuffs. And a collar. Of course, he had seen Lysander the second he'd entered the room but had stayed elf-quiet. Even now, chained to the wall, it seemed Lysander might blink and the elf would melt into the shadows.

He headed back to the door, intent on leaving, but as he sheathed the blades against his back—taking a few swipes at it, due to the fact the room kept spinning with him in it—his thoughts stalled. He closed the door instead.

Turning his head, he met that elf's icy glare. Defiance kept his expression proud. Even tied as he was, that didn't deter the fierceness in his eyes. He looked at Lysander the same now as he had in the dungeon, like the second he got free he'd kill him. He didn't look nearly as weak as he should have. Didn't they need light to live? This one looked like vengeance alone sustained him.

The elf watched Lysander approach. Keen elven eyes designed for hunting and seeing in low light stared, unblinking. His pupils were full and dark, like a new moon. His mouth held a firm sneer, just for Lysander. And those pointed ears pricked through his long, braided, platinum blond hair, ruffled and knotted from his ordeal. Hair so pale it was almost white.

Ganaoah had cut him up just as Akiem had commanded, carving deep lines down the elf's chest—or so Akiem had said. Lysander couldn't see the wounds beneath the elf's jerkin, but he didn't look sickly. In fact, he seemed to be healing extraordinarily fast. They hadn't gotten answers from him. Torture wouldn't make this one talk. Whatever his life had been like, this elf was honed to kill.

Lysander snatched a chair from a nearby table and planted it facing backward a few strides from the elf. He straddled it so he could brace his arms on the back and stop the walls from moving.

"She has you now, huh?" he asked, wondering if he'd slurred as much out loud as he had in his head. "Then we have that in common."

The elf's eyes narrowed.

“She will fuck anyone and anything if she thinks it’ll give her an advantage. Even an *elf*.” The disgust in Lysander’s voice wasn’t for the elf, not really, though from the elf’s twitch, he seemed to believe it. Good. He could hurt right alongside Lysander.

He should have stopped this elf, should have cut him down the same way he should have cut out Elisandra from the brood like rot from an apple’s core. Akiem would have killed the elf without blinking. Akiem could stop Elisandra... He chuckled at his own foolishness. No dragon could stop the bitch-queen.

“Don’t say much, do you?” Lysander rested his chin on his folded arms and watched as the elf tried to read him, to read this situation. He couldn’t have missed his stumbling and likely knew he was exceedingly and exquisitely drunk. Would the elf try to talk him around, try to persuade the prince to free him?

“Not to you,” the elf finally said.

Oh, so he did speak. Although it had taken so long, Lysander had forgotten the question. He had a smooth voice, this elf. One he imagined didn’t have to be raised in anger. He spoke, and his people would listen. He had the arrogance, at least. Who was he? Just another assassin, flung at the brood like arrows from a bow, or was this one something else? Something important, perhaps. Lysander looked closer. He had seen him shirtless and knew those arms were muscled enough to swing a sword without tiring, but not too much that he’d be cumbersome. He was swift, light on his feet. Faster than Lysander, though the prince would never admit it. He had only caught the elf because of a mistake. The elf had rushed his attack, knowing he was running out of time to finish the kill and Lysander had cut him down.

Should have let him have the kill, Lysander thought. He couldn’t fathom why he’d saved her. *Should have opened the damn door and let the assassin have her*. He turned his face away, feeling the elf’s gaze follow, taking the prince’s hesitation in. What did it matter? This elf was as trapped as Lysander.

The elf still watched as though waiting for Lysander to admit what they both knew.

“I don’t know who I pity more, you or me,” Lysander said.

“Do not pity me.”

The prince chuckled. “That leaves me, I suppose.”

“Pity is for fools.”

Well, all right then. “I still don’t know your name.”

The elf looked away.

With a sigh, the prince stood, keeping a hand on the chair to hold him steady. “It’ll be a shame when she breaks you. And she will. First, you will fight because you think you can win. Then, after much pain,” he laughed darkly, “you will accept what she gives you. And inside, you’ll become a cold thing. A hard, hollow thing.”

That elven defiance flared hotter. He breathed in. His lips turned down, fighting with a sneer. So proud a thing, Lysander thought. Elves all over would cry when he died. Perhaps they already did. One in particular maybe. A mate. Did she weep for him now?

Lysander shoved off the chair and ventured closer. The elf’s straps and chains had some slack, enough that he could potentially hook a length of it around the prince’s neck if Lysander were to get close enough. It would solve a lot of problems.

Closer, and the elf lifted his chin.

If this nameless elf killed Lysander now, the pain would go away. No more Elisandra, no more shame, no more weakness, no more having to publicly fuck a bronze and face his own death right after. If this elf killed him now, Lysander could fall forever and never hit the ground.

Closer. The elf shifted back an inch and tilted his head, narrowing his eyes, assessing, reading, learning.

This elf hadn’t seen half of what the dragonkin would do to him. Maybe Lysander could save him that pain. Take a blade to the elf’s throat here and now, and end it before he lost that fire in his eyes.

Lysander reached over his shoulder and freed one of his blades.

The elf breathed in, expanding his chest. His eyes darted from the naked blade to Lysander’s face. This close, Lysander could smell the cleaning wraps used on his wounded wrist and smell him, a curiously evocative scent of warm wood and pine, one that reminded the prince of soaring above the forest canopies. He smelled like wildness, like freedom, like all the things he ached for and could never have.

Lysander stretched his arm over the elf’s shoulder and spread his hand against the wall. The elf could thrust his arm up, hook the strap around the prince’s neck and probably end it in a blink. The elf’s breaths quickened, and that telltale muscle fluttered in his cheek. A battle raged inside him,

Lysander read. He wanted the prince dead. Every instinct had him thirsting for blood, and a creature like him... He knew how to kill with just his hands. They had fought, blades clashing, and now they fought again, but this time was different. Restrained, like he was, the elf could be Lysander's. *He should be mine and she took him.*

Lysander tested the line between them and leaned in, his mouth close enough to steal the elf's racing breaths. He could pull back, turn his head, he had room, but he didn't move. Because he was stubborn. A stubborn, proud, foolish creature that would meet his end beneath Elisandra's claws. Every defiant act, every fierce rebuttal, would see him ruined. Lysander had hoped to avoid that, but now, even he couldn't save this one. Same as he couldn't save himself.

Parting his lips, Lysander brushed a touch over the corner of the elf's mouth, and when he didn't respond, it was all he could do not to twist a hand in his hair and demand a kiss from him.

"Touch me again and I'll kill you," the elf said, his voice hard.

Lysander would kiss him, take him, own him, twist him to his desires even if he didn't want it until the elf spilled his seed, calling Lysander's name. Desire shuddered through the prince, pulling need into a tight, aching want that had him instantly, painfully hard. Like this, with the elf in chains, it would be so easy. But he wasn't Elisandra. He would never be her. And he wouldn't force this elf. That was her way, not his.

He hooked the tip of his blade under the elf's left wrist strap, and with a quick flick, the leather split, freeing his arm.

Lysander pushed away too fast and staggered as the room spun. The table caught him, holding him up as shame burned the lust away. What thing was he, aroused by a creature, an elf of all things! It didn't matter anyway. Maybe he'd get free, maybe Lysander *could* save him. At least, then, one of them would be free.

Two glasses sat on the table. Lysander imaged Dokul laughing at his failed performance and his mother laughing right along with him. The pair of them would maneuver him, use him, as they saw fit. He was done with it. Done with them.

He swept the glasses aside and relished the sound of them shattering against the stone floor. If only it were that easy to shatter everything else.

He was at the door, his mind far away when the elf spoke. "Why?"

Why free him? Why hadn't he taken the elf when he could have, why had he come here? The answers didn't matter. This was all just a drunken mistake.

Lysander glanced back, and the elf looked on with pity in his eyes. And that made fools of them both.

Lysander left him there, halfway to free and sought out another bottle to drown in.

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CHAPTER 9



Eroan

EROAN WAITED until the sound of the prince's staggers faded into silence before lifting his freed hand. He couldn't fathom why Lysander had done it. Some kind of trap to catch him in the act of escaping? Whatever the reason, it was done, and now Eroan had his opportunity. Not to run, but to kill. He reached up, eased his fingers beneath the wrist-wrapping and pulled the paring knife free. Heart pounding, he cut the leather cuff binding his sore wrist and knelt to slice through an ankle strap.

A fresh, warm, wet-metal smell alerted him too late. Five dragonkin poured into the room, barefooted and eerily quiet. Each wore dark clothes and hoods. Eroan knew assassins when he saw them. He hacked at the remaining strap, finally freeing himself, and looked up from his crouch. They had him boxed in. Golden eyes glowed in their eagerness.

Too many.

"Come easy now, elf." One loomed closer, a hood and rope in his hands.

Eroan feigned left, sending the dragonflight one way while he darted the other. A thick-fingered hand made a grab for him, but he slashed back and up, opening a gash in the bronze's palm. The brute swore, clutching his hand. The others darted forward, startlingly fast for their bulk.

Eroan ducked a second grab and with a vicious jab, punched the paring knife into the dragonkin's chest, sinking the tiny blade deep between two fat

ribs. The beast grunted and staggered into one of his companions, wide-eyed and oblivious to the fact he was already dead, it would just take a few seconds more for his body to hit the floor. Eroan never missed the heart.

A fist came from the right, cracked across Eroan's cheek, and dumped him facedown before he knew he'd been hit. A bronze kicked the knife from his hand. It skittered across the stones to where the one he'd stabbed lay dead-eyed and motionless.

Rough hands yanked his arms behind him, twisting his wounded wrist, wrenching a gasp from him, and pulled him to his feet.

Eroan felt laughter bubble inside him. He'd come for the queen, and now these bronze had come for him. Well, he'd take all of them down if he could.

A fist slammed into his gut, folding him around breathless pain. Still, the laughter bubbled. Maybe he was losing his mind. Didn't matter.

"Think that's funny, elf? You won't be laughing soon." The bronze clamped a massive hand around Eroan's skull and jerked him so close Eroan smelled the sweat on his dark clothes.

"What is this?!" Lysander stood in the doorway, eyes narrowed as he flicked his gaze over the intruders. He drew his blades.

"None of your concern, prince," Eroan's captor snarled.

"Dokul... know you're here?" the prince slurred and staggered, setting one of the bronze sniggering. "Damn you..." Lysander plunged in, faster and lighter than the bronze but it wouldn't last. The prince managed to get a few vicious slashes in before the bronze planted their fists in his face and gut, knocking the drunken fight right out of him. He went down hard, grunting when one of the bronze dealt him a swift kick to the side.

"Stay down, *prince*."

Eroan bucked and twisted, then brought his heel down on the bronze's shin, cracking it hard and fast. His captor swore. His grip loosened, but a bag came down over Eroan's head and a slip-knot tightened at his throat, cutting off his air. The rope yanked backward, digging into his neck. His lungs jerked, chest burning. He clawed at the rope, trying to loosen it. Blood whooshed, his heart pounded, then the knot was worked, and air rushed over Eroan's tongue, filling his lungs. He swayed, staggered, but could see nothing through the bag. His hands were captured and yanked behind him again.

“Piss me off and that happens again,” his captor snarled. “There’s a good elf.”

The wet smell of his breath and the stench of the rotten bag watered Eroan’s eyes. Panting, he wheezed and spluttered. This was worse... so much worse.

Fingers dug into his arm and pulled him into motion, out the chamber.

Eroan listened as he was led on. The bronze flight moved without talking. He heard their breaths, their pauses, their careful footfalls. Doors opened and clunked shut behind them. Water dripped and the temperature dropped. They were taking him down, farther into the tower. Cool, fresh air wafted in under the bag and Eroan breathed it deeply. The echo of corridors opened into a larger cavernous space. A distant roar sounded, trembling the air, and he was shoved into a pocket of rock with a hand smothering the bag over his nose and mouth. He writhed enough so he could breathe and listened to the bronze pressed in around him. The roaring ceased, and they moved again. Hands tugged and groped and yanked when he fell or stumbled.

The air and sounds changed. A chill touched Eroan’s hands, still bound behind his back, and the ground beneath his bare feet became pebbly and dirt-covered. The sounds of water lapping and the clunk of rigging and his heart raced some more. A boat. They were taking him away from the tower, away from the queen. Whatever Elisandra had over their chief, Dokul, it wasn’t enough to stop him from stealing what she saw as hers.

As Eroan was shoved and manhandled into the damp, cold hull, his opportunity to kill the queen slipped farther and farther away. Oars sloshed, the boat rocked, and Eroan’s weary thoughts drifted to memories of racing through the tree canopies to where he was free.

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CHAPTER 10



Lysander

ELISANDRA PACED THE HALL, her heeled boots striking against stone. “How dare he steal my property!”

Lysander’s gaze tracked her every step. His head throbbed, and the kick the bronze had dealt to the ribs beat the same kind of dull, aching heat. Sick and wretched, there was nothing he could do but swallow the self-loathing. If he hadn’t been off-his-head drunk, he could have cut those bronze down.

Pain twinged up his side. He adjusted his shoulders against the wall. Battered in dragon form and now human too. A part of him wanted to curl up in a corner and lick his wounds.

“We have a flight to the west, scouring the skies, but the morning light is low on the horizon,” Akiem said, tall and proud in his obsidian armor. Three lines of guards stood behind him, blocking much of Lysander’s view to the front of the room. “They planned their theft perfectly with the sunrise.”

“I don’t want to hear how perfectly they planned this!” the queen snapped. “They took my pet from my chamber!”

A door clattered, drawing his brother’s and the queen’s gazes to the rear of the hall. Dokul was back, this time flanked by six of his own personal guard and armored to the chin in battle gear. To enter the queen’s council

unbidden was an insult. To enter armed to the teeth was potentially an act of war.

Lysander straightened and felt the burn of his blades against his back. His fingers twitched at the prospect of a fight.

“*You!*” Elisandra pointed a finger, nails shining black. “You did this. Don’t try to tell me you didn’t.”

“This is not my doing,” he flatly denied. Another insult.

Elisandra’s dark outline wobbled, her human form briefly stuttering.

Lysander snorted. None of the bronze acted without their chief’s command. To even admit such a thing was to admit weakness. Did Dokul want the elf so badly as to lie to Elisandra? All of this over one elven assassin. It would have been comical if it weren’t for the dead bronze the elf had left behind. A death Lysander was likely partly responsible for. He *had* cut the elf’s restraints. Not that the elf had needed help. When Lysander had dragged himself off the floor beside the dead bronze, he’d found the bloody paring knife and tucked it into his boot. There was no need to alert everyone as to how the elf might have managed to get himself a knife from the kitchens and use it. He was a smart one, Lysander had to give him that.

“We were invited here in peace,” Dokul’s mouth twisted. “And now one of our own has been killed. I demand recompense.”

Elisandra’s nostrils flared. “Recompense?” Her eyes widened. “For this indiscretion, I’ll let you live, that’s all the recompense you’ll be getting from me.” She swept a hand. “Get out. I want all your brood gone by the time the sun reaches its zenith. Should any remain, I will kill them myself.”

Dokul’s cheek twitched. He jerked his head down, in the briefest of bows that wouldn’t see his head bitten off, then he stalked back the way he’d come, his guards clunking along behind him.

When they’d left, Lysander felt Elisandra’s gaze crawl over him. “And you?”

He dropped his head back against the wall and blinked at the ceiling. Of course, her wrath would fall on him eventually. “Yes, Mother. What of me?”

“So drunk you killed only one!”

He’d take that credit. It was better than admitting he’d gotten his ass handed to him. “They won’t take the elf by wing.” He pushed off the wall and walked up the line of mute guards. He knew most by name. Some, he’d

personally trained. None cared to look at him now, too afraid his mother would rip their balls off.

“Of course they will,” she ranted. “It’ll take them days on foot.”

True. But Lysander figured they’d gone another way. Something quick, something silent, and something unexpected.

“I’ll take my flight and track them,” Akiem offered.

Elisandra flicked her eyes to her eldest son. Akiem and his flight were one of the finest. Having them away from the tower left her exposed. Lysander watched his mother think, watched her weigh the odds of an attack. It wouldn’t have concerned her before. She’d always had Lysander as her last line of defense. He smiled to himself, still feeling the ghost of her claws in his gut and no doubt she felt it too. They weren’t on the best of terms.

“Go, then. You have until nightfall. Return before then, with or without this Eroan Ilanea.”

Lysander hid the surprise at hearing the elf’s name and focused instead on the passing of the guards. His brother was the last to leave. He ignored Lysander, just like all the others had. Moments later, the tower shook with their battle cries and the beat of their wings.

“Is my coupling with the bronze off the table?”

“Oh no,” Elisandra glared. “More than ever, I need that bastard’s flights under me. I don’t trust him. He is of the old ways, and they were always... difficult. If he won’t submit to me, then you’ll breed my soldiers under him. This is just a distraction. He took the elf. I know he did. I saw the way he looked at it. He wanted it, even tried to bargain for it.”

“Mother—”

“Do not test me. I will carve your heart out and have Akiem seed my power for me.”

Lysander felt the dregs of his drunkenness loosen his tongue. “Then send him and be done with it. I can’t fuck a bronze—”

Her lips rippled, a snarl breaking through. She threw a hand at him, one that might have backhanded him across the face if he hadn’t moved at the last second. “Get out of my sight!”

Lysander dipped his head and turned. He wouldn’t run. He’d done enough running. But he couldn’t fly either, his mother had seen to that. There were other ways. The stables housed horses for the hunting feasts. It

had been a few years since he'd ridden one of the beasts, but he'd cover more ground on four legs than his two.

If Dokul wanted Eroan so badly, maybe there was an opportunity there, but only if Lysander found the elf first.



THE HORSE, a piebald mare, shied from Lysander's touch and whinnied, scraping a hoof against the stall floor. He offered his hand. "Shh, you're not to be dinner today."

The mare eyed him down her long nose and snuffled.

"All right. Normally the situation would be different. Dragons don't often ride horses, but I got a little wing problem, and you're faster than running, so what say we put our differences aside and get along?"

She swished her tail but carefully lowered her head and toed forward.

"I know what it feels like to have a dragon on your back," he said, rubbing at her velvety nose. When she didn't shy, he tossed the reins over her neck. "Maybe I'll let you go after, how does that sound? It's a better chance than the one you have in here." He grabbed a tuft of mane and threw a leg over, heaving himself onto her bareback. The horse restlessly trotted on the spot. "There, not so bad. Prey, predator, these roles don't define us —"

The horse reared, kicking at the air. Lysander clenched his thighs and hung on, feeling the beast's heart gallop. Then she was off, veering, bucking and racing out of the stables like the place was ablaze. Lysander stayed tucked in and clung on, watching the forest roll and the horse plow into the undergrowth like a thing possessed. Her hooves beat the earth, and with every labored breath, every thunderous leap, Lysander's smile grew. Fuck yeah, this beast could *fly*.

Sunlight sent shafts through the canopy, highlighting old-world wreckage and twisted hulks of metal spewing undergrowth. Over and around the horse darted until, eventually, she slowed to a plodding gait, resigned to the fact the dragon on her back wasn't getting off.

"I should give you a name." Lysander pulled on the reins, turning the horse westward. Golden leaves fell like rain and twirled in the air. He'd forgotten how peaceful the forest was from below its canopy. "She got a

name out of him..." he said, thinking of how the elf had stubbornly refused him, but not his mother. "I was so sure he'd take it to his death." The idea that the elf had given his mother something weakened him in Lysander's mind. He'd almost admired the elf's stubbornness. Somewhere inside, he'd hoped this Eroan would hold out, but like everything she touched, Elisandra had broken him.

The horse huffed and plodded on.

"I'd call you after him... *Eroan*." He tasted the name on his lips and then remembered tasting *him*. The corner of the elf's lips, twisted into a snarl, had tasted sweet. That had been a drunken mistake. "We don't generally name our food or our pets..." He'd been making a lot of those mistakes. Recapturing the elf would go a long way to getting his mother off his back, or make an excellent bargaining chip with Dokul. He hadn't yet decided how to play it. Of course, he had to find the bronze party first.

The sound of water rushing drew Lysander off the path. He reached the bank and scanned the wide, swollen river with its low, flooded banks. Twisting on the horse's back, he peered up at the tower through the trees. So large, it still loomed behind, huge and overbearing, like the dragonkin who sat atop it.

Facing the flooded waters again, he considered the time of year. A river would make a fine escape route. It meandered and wandered through the dragonlands. They didn't even need to get far, just far enough to be outside the obvious flightpaths. Once out of sight, they could take to the wing and then the elf would be lost, probably forever. The bronze would have their fun and kill him, eventually.

The horse dropped her head to drink, almost unseating Lysander on her back. He shifted his weight and patted her flank. This had to be the right route. All he had to do was follow the river. "Let's find their boat."

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CHAPTER 11



E_{roan}

THE BOAT GROANED, jolting Eroan from a fitful sleep. The vessel scraped and thumped and finally stopped its incessant rocking. The stench of the bag and the rolling motion hadn't done Eroan's gut any favors. Sleep had seemed the only way out, but the dreams waiting for him there hadn't been kind.

Boots stomped nearby. Hands dug into his arms, and like before, he was marched, blind, up a set of steps, onto the deck. Rain patted his shoulders and hissed against the deck boards. He'd barely made it down the springing plank before rain had soaked through the bag and trickled down his back.

Murmurings from the bronze crew revealed they'd hauled the boat out before reaching a narrow section of river and its rapids. Eroan was thankful for that, at least.

Hands pushed down on his shoulders, forcing him to sit on what he assumed to be a fallen log. He listened to fat raindrops *drip-dripping* against nearby leaves, muffling most sounds outside the camp. They were still in the forest then, somewhere the vegetation was thick and not burned to cinders like the grounds around the tower. Pine scented the air when he could catch a breath of it. It could almost be home if not for the stench of dragon.

"Let's get a proper look at you."

The bag vanished from his head.

Eroan blinked into warm orangey hues. Four bronze sat around the beginnings of a campfire. *They'll be lucky to get it started with wet wood*, Eroan thought idly and smiled. Ironical. As human, they couldn't warm themselves. One of them had a flint and steel—a firemaking device—and was trying to summon a spark among damp kindling. Eroan looked away before the laughter he swallowed invited their fists. Outside the camp, a dusky gloom had closed in. Nightfall. They might take to the air once the dark settled. He'd never flown, never had his feet higher than the tree canopy and didn't much relish the thought of being any higher.

His captor, the one who'd floored him with a punch, dug his fingers into the collar still fixed around Eroan's neck and pulled. Thick fingers pushed into Eroan's neck, cutting off his air.

The bronze gave him a long, hungry look before letting go and making his way toward the fire. Eroan coughed and swallowed, drawing the bronze's eye back to him. His gaze lingered too long, shifting to where the thin, rain-soaked cotton shirt clung to Eroan's chest.

Anger sizzled in Eroan's gut, and the bronze's hard mouth pulled into a smirk.

"When was the last time you saw one?"

His captor looked across the sparking fire to his companion. This one had a smooth, shaven head too, and a golden beard cropped short. He scratched at it now and nodded toward Eroan. "Elves," he added.

"Nobody seen 'em in the west since we were kits," Eroan's captor grumbled. "Rare now. Maybe rarer than humans."

The fire caught. Flames licked and fought against the rain. Eventually, they took hold, and Eroan lost his thoughts to the flickering dance. Better that than listen to the bronze remark on how they'd successfully wiped most of the elves decades ago. Eroan's people had been softer then. It had almost cost them everything. Things were different now. His people were different now.

The bronze crew settled around their campfire, coming and going, hunting for game, checking the perimeter. This deep in the forest with the low clouds, they wouldn't be spotted from above.

They skinned and spit roasted rabbit over the fire. Eroan's mouth watered. His captor occasionally sent a glance Eroan's way, catching how

Eroan tracked the sizzling meat, and returned to his feast, biting and chewing with more gusto.

“Hungry for some rabbit, huh?” his captor asked.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and the rain started again.

“No.”

“No?” the bronze tossed his gnawed-on bone into the fire and wiped his greasy hands on his leather pants. “If it ain’t rabbit, then what do you hunger for, elf?”

Eroan looked down at the litter-strewn forest floor.

“Kerrik, leave it. Dokul’ll break you if you break it before he gets his chance.”

Eroan wasn’t sure who’d spoken. He kept his head down. Maybe if he could make himself into a small, weak thing, this Kerrik would lose interest.

“I ain’t gonna do shit.”

Eroan saw Kerrik’s boots plant in front of him. With his hands bound behind, he wasn’t going to be fighting his way out of this. *Stay small*. The anger was back, an ever-present ball of hate for these animals, but if the bronze saw it, this situation would only get worse.

Kerrik’s fist locked in Eroan’s hair. He jerked Eroan’s head back and with his other hand, he cupped his own crotch. “Hungry for this, maybe?”

Pain lashed down Eroan’s neck, but it was nothing compared to the disgust burning through his veins. He bared his teeth. “Touch me and your chief will kill you.”

“My chief?” Kerrik’s thick eyebrow arched. “Dokul doesn’t give a shit what I do with you. Just so long as you’re still breathing when I’m done.” His hand clamped around Eroan’s throat and squeezed. “You got a lot of fiery words for a pet elf.”

Eroan gritted his teeth. The bronze had him half-lifted off the log. The hand scrunched in his hair twisted, forcing Eroan’s head to the side, exposing his neck. Rage scorched his veins and trembled through his muscles.

Kerrik pulled him onto his feet and breathed in behind Eroan’s ear. “You smell good. I don’t know if I should fuck or eat you. As I can’t eat you, I guess we both know what happens next. You ever taken a male like me?”

Kerrik shoved Eroan back. The log tripped him. He went down hard on his side. The bronze reached down with one hand while the other made

quick work of his belt.

Eroan snarled, gritting his teeth, breathing hard. This had been coming for hours now, but the bastard bronze wouldn't find him easy.

Kerrik's thick lips curved into a grin. He grabbed for Eroan's arm.

Eroan kicked out, hard and fast, cracking his heel deep into the beast's crotch. The brute screeched and reeled back. The log tripped him too, and he collapsed backward into the campfire, scattering embers, flame, and burning meat.

Eroan was up and running but only managed a few strides before a bronze slammed into him from behind, tackling him against a tree. Rough, gnarled bark chewed at Eroan's cheek and jaw.

"A kick to the balls ain't gonna stop me, you fucker. That's foreplay in our brood."

An arm dug into Eroan's neck, ramming him harder into the tree. He twisted and tugged on the bindings, setting his wrist on fire all over again, but the ropes weren't loosening. Kerrik's fingers groped over his ass, kneading hard enough to bring a hiss to Eroan's lips.

"You just done and gone made it ten times worse," Kerrik snarled into Eroan's ear. "I was gonna take it easy on you, make sure I didn't leave a mark. Now I'm gonna fuck you until you're crying for your bitch of an elf mother."

"Kerrik! You hurt him and Dokul will kill you."

"Listen to your friend," Eroan growled out, tasting blood from a split in his cheek.

The hand was gone from Eroan's ass, but the arm stayed pinned against the back of his neck. Kerrik grunted and let out a deep, guttural moan, then the brute pressed in, plastering his hot body against Eroan's back. Eroan squeezed his eyes. No, Alumn, no! "Damn you and your kind, damn you to Ifreann. Do this and I'll hunt you down, cut off your cock, and ram it down your throat."

His hard arousal dug into Eroan's hip and ground upward. The dragon shuddered his pleasure. "Fucking hells, elf. You're only making me harder with all that sweet talk."

"I've never killed a man with his own penis before, but I'd make an exception for you."

Kerrik laughed a deep, belly laughter. He slapped Eroan's ass and sank his fingers into Eroan's belt, but instead of pulling Eroan's trousers down,

he paused. Eroan's heart tried to thump its way out of his chest. This was happening. He'd known of their brutality but had never planned on staying alive long enough to become a victim of it. All he could hope for was that the bastard finished quickly. He'd heal. It wouldn't kill him. He'd suffered wounds, terrible wounds. This would pass.

The arm vanished from Eroan's neck but was quickly replaced by the rough hand at his throat. Kerrik twisted Eroan to face him. The bastard's eyes glowed a brilliant tarnished bronze. He switched his grip to Eroan's hair, knotted his fingers and forced him to his knees.

Eroan twisted and tugged, trying to pull from the hold, but the best he could do was keep his head turned away from the man's erect member. "You want me to suck you off, you risk me biting it off, you piece of dragon krak."

The hand was at Eroan's throat again, and this time it clamped tight, choking off his air.

"If you wanna live, you're gonna suck me dry." Kerrik took his cock in his free hand and stroked the swollen tip between his finger and thumb. He squeezed Eroan's throat tighter still. Stars splashed in Eroan's sight. "Get a good look elf, you're gonna take it all in, and then when I'm done, the rest of my brothers here are gonna fuck you until you're drenched in us. But you'll stay breathing. And when it's over, you'll thank us, and you won't say a fucking word to Dokul, else we'll do it all again."

Eroan jerked and twitched, everything in him trying to fight free. He couldn't reach up to claw the man's grip off him, couldn't pull in enough breath to stop the pounding in his head. They might not want him dead, but it wouldn't take much. A squeeze too tight, a second too long. If he died here, like this, his whole life with the Order had been for nothing.

Kerrik's cruel smile opened and the man licked his lips. He squeezed the end of his flushed cock and shifted his hips, arching at just the right angle for Eroan's lips. When he had angled himself an inch away from Eroan's mouth, he eased his grip on Eroan's throat.

Eroan gasped. He wanted to fight, his pride demanded he fight every second, but there was no way to fight this. With a sickening hollowing in his stomach, he realized this was happening, no matter what he said or did.

Kerrik gazed down between them and stroked his cock, milking a bead of pre-cum to the head. Jaw slack and eyes glazed, he brushed his glistening tip against Eroan's chin, smearing the wetness.

Eroan bared his teeth, and Kerrick's grip tightened. "You're gonna be good, now. Open your mo—"

The sword sang as it flew in a silvery arc straight over Eroan's head. When it struck Kerrik's gut, its song stopped, leaving a crisp silence peppered only by the sound of rain on leaves. The bronze blinked, surprised to find a sword in his gut.

Eroan tore himself free of Kerrik's weakening fingers and staggered back. The blade's sweep and curve were one he'd seen before.

Kerrick fell to a knee, still with his cock in one hand while the other gingerly groped at the sword in his chest.

A growl reverberated through the camp. Deep and menacing.

Lysander stormed from the undergrowth, his one remaining blade swirling in his hand and a smile on his face that said he'd found exactly what he'd been looking for.

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CHAPTER 12



Lysander

LYSANDER TASTED BLOOD in the air and wanted more, so much more. The bronze flight scrabbled in the dirt for their weapons, but it was too little too late. He cut the first down with a quick and clean slash across the male's exposed throat. Two left, and one managed to free his twin daggers for all the good they did him. Lysander's sword severed a hand from its wrist. He kicked the same bronze in the chest and sent him sprawling as the remaining bronze roared and tried to tackle the prince. They moved like cattle, slow and lumbering. Lysander darted to the side and brought his sword down across the back of the male's neck. The blade lodged in the vertebra, sticking fast. He tugged, tore it free, and took a second swing, severing the head from the rest of the body.

Lysander turned in the center of the camp, bloodlust galloping through his veins, but there were no more bronze to kill. Besides the one still propped on his knees with the other blade lodged in his intestines. The bronze's only chance now might be to shift, but with a sword in his gut, there was no knowing where the magic would put that sword. He could shift only to find it embedded in his heart.

The elf—Eroan, Lysander corrected, now that he knew the name—stood, wrists bound, in the same spot he'd been in when Lysander had made his entrance. If he was fazed by any of what he saw, his stoic face showed

nothing. He could have at least looked impressed. Lysander was damn impressed. Nobody could have slaughtered three, almost four, bronze in a blink like he just had. It was a shame his mother hadn't been here to witness it. Although had she been, she would have likely found fault with it.

He lifted the bloody sword and approached Eroan. He flicked his gaze up, fast and sharp, either ready to bolt or do something foolish like attack, and with his wrists tied too. "Easy." Lysander stretched out a friendly hand and beckoned with his fingers. "Your wrists?"

Something dangerous twitched beneath the elf's guarded expression. He eyed Lysander's approach, then turned and presented his bound wrists at his lower back. Lysander cut the ropes and moved off in search of a fat leaf he could wipe the blade clean on, but also to get clear. "The group didn't get far from the tower," he spoke, hoping to ease a crackling tension. The elf was wound tight, tighter than the night he'd tried to kill the queen.

Thunder rumbled.

Lysander found a leaf, plucked it free, and wiped the sword. Eroan had taken a few steps to position himself in front of the kneeling bronze. He looked down at the brute, his profile lean and lethal, the bronze clearly submissive in front of him.

Lysander quietly maneuvered to get a clearer view at the bronze's face. Pale and stricken, the haunted look in his eyes made it clear he knew it wouldn't be over for him anytime soon. Gut wounds could take hours to kill. Maybe Eroan would take pity on him and end it sooner?

Eroan gripped the sword sticking from the bronze's chest and yanked it free, spilling a few pink, wet entrails with it. Lysander figured the elf would cut the bronze's throat now, but instead, he knelt, reached between the bronze's legs with his left hand, cupped the bronze's flaccid cock, and brought the blade down in one surgical slice.

Lysander stopped moving.

The bronze groaned and wept. A string of begs tumbled from his lips. Eroan straightened, dropped the sword, swapped the severed cock to his other hand, grabbed the bronze by the hair, and forced his head back. The elf made a proud sight towering over the bronze, shirt and jerkin soaked through and glued to his skin, hair plastered down his back, but the sight of him forcing the cock into the bronze's mouth was either the most terrifying thing Lysander had ever seen or the most erotic.

Eroan gripped the bronze's jaw, fixing it so he couldn't spit. "*Hungry for this, dragon?*"

Sweet fucking diamonds, weren't elves supposed to be all brightness and light or some shit? Lysander knew their assassins were different but this... this was... he didn't have words to describe this.

The bronze, gagging and choking on his severed penis, finally slumped forward, and when Eroan let go, he collapsed facedown with a dull thud.

Eroan stood breathing hard in the rain, peering down at his prey. Time seemed to slow to a grinding halt, and then, with a blink, Eroan picked up the sword and made straight for Lysander.

Lysander readied the sword's twin in his hands, not entirely sure where this was about to go or how it would end. He'd freed Eroan, but they were still enemies. For all the trouble it caused, Lysander would quite like to keep his cock between his legs.

Eroan turned the blade over, holding it by the steel, and handed it out. "This is yours."

Warily, Lysander took it and lowered both weapons to his sides. So, what was this now? The bronze all lay dead and cooling in the rain, and now the elf had handed him back his blades. Were they enemies still? Or was this some kind of truce?

"You should go," Lysander said, surprising himself. He'd planned on recapturing the elf either for Dokul or his mother, but neither idea felt right after *this*, after a lot of things. Eroan could be free, and that had to be the best outcome here.

Eroan looked around the clearing as though seeing the dead dragonkin for the first time. His brow pinched. "You killed your own?" he asked.

"Not for you, if that's what you think. They stole from the amethyst. I already told you, we don't suffer thieves and assassins."

"They stole *me*. You're letting me go?" Eroan's cool and measured gaze found Lysander again, making his dragon heart flutter just a little bit faster. "I don't understand."

Lysander chuckled. He supposed it was a little odd. A dragon prince allowing the assassin to go free. "That makes two of us. Look, this—" He sheathed one of the swords at his back and gestured at the steaming mess of bodies. "I got here too late. You escaped. Give it a few days and Mother will lose interest in you. Life goes on, for you anyway." Tearing off another

leaf from a nearby bush, he concentrated on wiping the second blade instead of facing the elf's scrutiny. "Go. Before I change my mind."

Eroan backed up but instead of running, like he should, he scanned the carnage again, his scowl deepening.

"Elf, you're trying my patience. Akiem's looking for this party. If he finds you, I—"

"Take me back."

"What?"

"Take me back to the tower."

Lysander looked for some signs of a head injury but found none, just a whole lot of wet silvery hair and bright, inquisitive eyes.

He returned the blade to its back-sheath and rolled his shoulders, settling the swords into place. "Are you insane?"

"Why do you keep letting me go?"

"Why won't you leave?" Lysander shook his head and started back the way he'd come. This was absurd. "Run. Don't. I don't care."

Of course, the damn elf was following.

Lysander stopped and sighed out. He looked up, through the canopy, but the sky was hidden behind storm clouds. Thunder rumbled and rainwater trickled down the back of his neck. The elf hadn't gone. He was right behind him. Lysander could feel his presence like a hot electrical current running through his veins. "Go home, elf. Go back to whatever family you have and keep them safe. Don't come back to these lands."

A second passed, then another. Lysander struggled to hear Eroan but knew he was still back there.

"I don't have a family," Eroan said.

Lysander looked back at this paradox of a male with his oddly tipped ears and minimal words. "Then go make one. The only thing that's waiting for you at the tower is torture. Nobody in their right mind walks back into her clutches."

His eyes flicked up. "You're going back to her."

Lysander laughed. Maybe this elf *was* insane. "Because nobody has cut my ropes."

The elf's eyes narrowed, sharpening his glare with intent. "You could have killed me when we first fought, but you didn't."

Lysander laughed him off and stomped through the wet brush. He'd left the horse around here somewhere. "Don't go looking for meanings," he

grumbled. "I didn't kill you because she ordered you be kept alive."

"After you'd already captured me."

So clever was he, this elf. Observant, clearly. Lysander would have expected nothing less from an assassin.

"You wanted me to survive."

"I wanted no such thing. I'm her son. I don't let assassins live." He growled low in his throat. "Apart from now. And that offer is fast wearing off." Lysander stopped and whirled. "Back off, *elf*." He let a little more of the dragon bleed through his voice. Magic swelled beneath his skin. "Last chance."

Eroan arched an eyebrow and looked like he might be a second away from smiling. "Or you'll what? Take me back to her?"

Lysander reached behind his shoulders and pulled both blades free. When the elf continued to just blink at him, he lunged, crossing the blades, using them to drive the elf back against a tree. He expected some kind of fight, anything. In fact, he wanted it, *ached* for it even. Murdering the bronze hadn't been enough to satiate the anger building in him but maybe this elf's death would. Only Eroan hadn't lifted a finger to fight him off and looked back at him now, swords crossed beneath his chin, without fear. If anything, this stupid elf appeared mildly intrigued.

"You're not going to kill me, prince." His lips ticked at one corner.

Damn it. Lysander huffed a sigh and pulled his swords back. "I don't need to. You're doing that yourself." He had a death wish, that was the only explanation. The elf *wanted* to die. Well, Lysander had done his part. He'd tried to help. He could do no more. Were all elves this stubborn?

Lysander stomped through the brush. His horse had wandered from the place he had left it, and now the skies had opened and had begun to dump sheets of rain over him.

He stood in the clearing and rubbed water from his face, resisting the urge to growl out a curse. Without the horse, the tower was a few days hike. He should return, and quickly, before Elisandra noticed he was gone. She probably already knew, which meant he'd be in for a world of pain when he returned without his prize.

He sighed, turned, and there he was, Eroan Ilanea, watching him with curious eyes. Soaked through, his long hair plastered to his face and neck, he still seemed almost serene, like neither of them had just slaughtered a

bronze flight, like they were just two people in the woods and all of this was perfectly normal. Maybe it was for elves?

Eroan folded his arms over his chest and shivered. He lowered his gaze, and Lysander found himself wondering what Eroan was thinking. He was in no hurry to deliver this elf to his fate; the fool might think differently about following him back to hell in daylight. “Let’s get out of this rain.”

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CHAPTER 13



Lysander uncovered a cavern entrance, one of many at the river's edge, and led the elf down into the dark. Rubble gave way underfoot, but the ceiling appeared stable and watertight. When he turned to tell Eroan they'd best find some dry wood, he found he was alone. Lysander chuckled to himself. The elf was unlikely to have abandoned his suicidal plan to return to the tower. He'd be back. Meanwhile, Lysander set to work clearing a patch of ground and building a fire.

Of all the things he'd seen, Eroan mutilating a bronze almost topped the list. He hadn't witnessed much of what went on before his arrival at the bronze camp, but he'd observed long enough to perfectly aim the sword-throw at the bronze's belly. Those few seconds revealed Eroan on his knees, hands bound, and what was likely a bronze cock in his mouth, though the angle was all wrong to know for sure. The entire flight would have fucked Eroan and probably killed him. Had Lysander taken a different turn off the path, had he gone upriver instead of down... Had he chosen not to come at all, the elf would be dead, and the bronze bastards would have been all the more pleased with themselves.

He had been within his rights to kill them, though Dokul likely wouldn't see it that way. But he hadn't expected to enjoy it, to relish the feel of his blades sinking into bronze flesh—a reminder not to fuck with the amethyst, not to fuck with Lysander. He'd failed when he'd been drunk in the chamber. But not now. It was almost a shame none had lived to tattle on him.

Pebbles skipped into the cavern and Eroan reappeared. He jogged down the mound of rubble and tossed something in front of where Lysander

crouched.

Lysander picked up the blocks of stone and metal connected with a small chain and examined it. A pocket firestarter. He'd likely gone back to the bronze camp to retrieve it. "You do realize I'm a dragon?" The question echoed around them.

Eroan's elven eyes sparkled in the near-dark. "I had noticed, but I've also noticed you don't seem inclined to take that form, else you would have attacked the camp very differently." He gestured at Lysander's pile of sticks and leaves. "I'm done with being cold and wet, so if you don't mind, *dragon...*"

Well, that was true enough, though Lysander didn't feel like telling the elf why he couldn't shift. He gathered the leaf litter and struck the steel against the stone. Sparks immediately caught the desiccated wood and minutes later Lysander stoked a roaring fire.

The firelight set their shadows dancing on the walls. These underground caverns could be found all over. Strange little things, Lysander quietly mused as he watched Eroan through the firelight. The elf had removed his jerkin, and now crossed his arms and pulled his clinging, wet shirt over his head. Firelight stroked over his rack of abdominal muscles and then, as he turned, that same light lapped up a defined back. He knelt down and stretched the shirt across a flat stone to dry.

Houses, that was the word the humans had used for these holes in the ground. Lysander lowered his gaze and started to untie his boots. Houses. Boxes. He couldn't see the difference. Apparently, almost all humans had one. They lived in them. Lovingly tended them. Some small, some big. It seemed a waste. Why they didn't all just sleep together was a mystery like many of the human ways, and one Lysander was happy to think on instead of thinking on the way the moving firelight licked over Eroan's sculpted arms. The elf's cuts had healed except for a few scars from the torture he'd endured. If Eroan ever found his torturer, Lysander wondered how long the dragon would last faced with the elf's vengeance.

"Do you know why they wanted me?" Eroan asked, sitting on a rock and draping his arms over his knees. Gathering all his hair in one hand, he pulled it over his shoulder and wrung water from the long tail.

"Because the bronze chief couldn't have you." Eroan's eyebrow lifted. "My mother refused him, so he took you anyway. He denies it, but what he has in strength, he lacks in intelligence."

“The bronze flight called him Dokul.”

“A recent name. He’s so old he doesn’t have a name from before. He’s one of the first. I don’t know a time without him.”

“Gold, Silver, and Bronze,” Eroan said, watching Lysander closely. “Gold and Silver are dead.” He said it like a statement, but there was a hint of query in there too, as though he wanted it confirmed.

So, the elves did know a little of dragonkin history. It paid to know your enemy. How well did Eroan believe he knew Lysander? Had the elf studied him from afar? What whispers traveled beyond the cast walls to elven ears, he wondered. “Dokul is the only one to survive the rising. The last of the great metal rulers. The jewel-line, my generation, came next. Faster, more cunning, more vicious in every way. Dokul could not contain us, and so he kneels to Elisandra, same as we all do.”

Eroan picked up a stick and teased it between his fingers. “May I ask a personal question?”

Lysander shrugged. He tugged off both boots and dumped them by the fire to dry. “Ask away...”

“Which came first, the dragon or the egg?” A smile pulled at his twitching mouth.

“Really? You’re the first elf in forever to have a dragon answering questions and you lead with that?” The elf’s mouth quirked and Lysander resisted a small laugh.

“It is a matter of hot debate among elves. Without the egg, there can be no dragon. Without the dragon—”

“I get it.” Lysander chuckled. Eroan was screwing with him, perhaps to lighten the gloom hanging over them. It worked. “So there’s such a thing as an elf with a sense of humor. Who knew? Such a shame this elf is about to walk voluntarily back to his own execution.”

Firelight smoothed Eroan’s face, catching in his eyes. A neat little bow of a mouth, one that had tasted oh-so-sweet. It was near to laughing now, and Lysander felt a curious warmth thawing him from the inside. There was a great deal more to this elf than the fleeting glimpses he’d revealed so far. Lysander found himself wanting to peel back those layers to discover what secrets lay beneath. “Why do you insist on going back?”

Eroan snapped the twig and tossed both pieces into the fire. Time ticked on, punctured by the sounds of dripping water and the occasional rumble of thunder.

Lysander clearly wasn't going to get his answer. He shook his head, laughing softly at his own foolishness. A dragon chatting with an elf. By the nights! It was unheard of. "The queen would not approve of my talking with you."

"Then why are you?"

He leaned back, stretched his legs out alongside the fire and braced his arms behind him, soaking up the warmth. He didn't answer because he didn't know the answer. He should have kept the elf bound and gagged the second he'd arrived at the camp, not freed him. It was yet another mistake and one he'd pay dearly for if Elisandra discovered it, but what could his mother do that she hadn't already? She had ordered his death the second he was promised to the bronze brood. She knew he couldn't perform for her and knew he would die, bloody, publicly, and a long way from home. The bitch could rot in her tower for all he cared. She was not getting her claws into *his* elf.

Eroan shifted and stretched out too, drawing Lysander's eye and his thoughts back to how the firelight played over Eroan's long, lean legs, roamed his waist and chest, and how it lapped across his mildly curious expression, softening hard lines. He was so proud a thing, strong and defiant in so many ways. His eyes alone held a fierce but raw honesty. And the rest of him... there wasn't a wasted inch on that body, a body honed and shaped to kill. Lysander had once dreamed he'd be the same as this elf. Powerful. Unyielding. Proud. With his swords swinging and the blood of his enemies spilling, during a battle, he could be the jeweled prince everyone expected him to be. Until the bloodletting ended and he was left empty all over again. Like now. He felt alive *now*. But soon, that rush, that power, would be gone and he'd be back under Elisandra.

Lysander's gaze snagged on the elf's, and for a moment, neither spoke. There was just firelight, warmth, and nothing else between them.

"I find myself asking what a dragon prince has on his mind to make his thoughts so dark a place."

"You really don't have a brood—a family?" Lysander asked, eager to steer the subject away from the thoughts in his head.

Eroan picked up another twig. This one went into the fire too. "Assassins of the Order are unencumbered by relationships. Of any kind."

What a waste of perfectly good genes and a reminder that Lysander was stretched out and at ease with an elf who would likely sever his cock from

his balls without so much as a wince. That was a sobering thought. And with it came the sobering image of seeing Eroan do exactly that to a bronze dragonkin twice his bulk.

He swallowed hard. "There's no one waiting for you to return?"

"We don't return—" Eroan lowered his gaze to the fire "—until it is done."

So many of the elves must not have returned. Could he do it, this elf? Could he kill Elisandra? Lysander's heart thudded harder. Fear, anticipation, hope. That was why Eroan wanted to go back. He had nothing else to live for. The queen's death was his only purpose. It didn't matter what she did to him. She could fuck him, cut him, shame him, and as long as he was alive, he'd steal every opportunity to kill her. He'd keep on trying until it was done or until she killed him first.

But Lysander lived that life every day.

He lay back and laced his hands behind his head. He almost wished he'd be around to see his mother's face the moment an elf cut out her heart and made her eat it. It would be all she deserved. She'd likely think she'd broken her little pet elf. She wouldn't even see the blow coming. Similarly, neither would Lysander if Eroan decided their little truce beside the campfire was over. "Are you going to kill me while I sleep?"

The words echoed too long for Lysander's liking. He lifted his head. The elf had propped himself against a rock, his head resting to one side as his chest slowly rose and fell. His lashes fluttered. Soft lips slightly parted. Asleep, he didn't look like the type to brutally stab a dragonkin in the chest and slice the cock off another. Asleep, he looked calm, like a dream, one Lysander could happily lose himself in.

"Guess not," Lysander smirked, and while the elf was out cold, he'd go right ahead and admire the forbidden, fire-licked temptation that was Eroan Ilanea.

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CHAPTER 14



Eroan

EROAN WOKE with a sickening emptiness in his stomach. Dreams had swept him up, dreams of dragons and males, and what might have happened had Lysander not stormed into the camp, swords swinging.

He rubbed at his face, trying to clear the nightmares from his mind.

The fire had burned down to glowing embers, its soft light barely penetrating the gloom.

Lysander wasn't opposite him, through the flames. Nor was he anywhere inside the den.

"Krak," Eroan swore. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, but the fire and Lysander's resonating voice had pulled him down, down where his body no longer ached for daylight, down where his wrist didn't throb and his gut didn't try to gnaw itself into a tight, aching ball of hunger.

He threw on his dry shirt and emerged from the cavern mouth. The rain had stopped, though heavy dampness still hung to the air. A breeze rustled the trees, revealing glimpses of the starlit sky above. From beneath the canopy, he couldn't get a fix on where in the dragonlands he was. Without Lysander, it would take longer to get back inside the tower, and if he encountered any dragon guards, in his weakened state, he could easily find himself in a situation like the one he'd just escaped. The prince had stolen a moment of Eroan's weakness to leave. But he couldn't have gotten far.

Eroan ventured farther from the cavern, deeper into the forest to be free of the river's burble, and crouched, listening to the forest's song. Water *tap-tapped* on leaves. Bats chittered, hunting fat moths after the storm. The breeze lifted and fell away again, filtering through thick undergrowth. And there, he caught it, the smell of dragon, leather, and steel. Lysander.

Eroan was up and moving, carving silently through the brush. Catching a low-slung branch, he swung into the canopy. Pain snapped and snarled up his arm, almost tripping him out of the trees. He slowed, crouched once more, cradled his wrist, and listened. There. The clang of metal, shortened gasps, and a scent Eroan hadn't ever expected to breathe in again. He pushed off, ran along the tree limb and leaped, landing in a sprint. Crashing through the bushes, he saw the elf ahead, her daggers flashing.

"Stop!"

Lysander feigned left, but the elf let loose a flurry of slashes, driving Lysander backward.

"Stop, Nylena!"

Her eyes flicked to him. Her pointed ears twitched, but Eroan knew that look. He wore the same one often enough. She wouldn't stop. Not for him, not for anything. He ducked and tackled her clean off her feet so the both of them went sprawling in the dirt. Eroan captured her wrists and pinned her, trapping those lethal daggers with her. She screamed at him, sharp teeth bared and snapping.

"Stop," he said again. She bucked beneath him until he clenched his thighs and pulled her close.

Breaths hissed through her teeth and fury lit her dilated pupils. The fight strummed through her. She'd tear out his throat to get to her prey.

"Nylena, it's me..."

She blinked, lashes fluttering. Her brow creased and finally, the fight melted out of her body beneath him. "Eroan?"

Lysander's movement drew Eroan's gaze. The dragon watched curiously, his blades still exposed, chest heaving. He hadn't escaped Nylena's daggers. A few nicks on his cheek wept blood. Another on his shoulder soaked his shirt, but nothing serious. Nylena was fast but sloppy. He'd tried to train that out of her.

"We thought... we thought you died..." Her eyes darted over his face. Hope initially widened them, but that soon faded, realization sinking in at

the sight of the collar around his neck. “No...” she breathed. “Not you, Eroan...”

Shame rolled through him like a sickness. He freed her wrists and straightened. “This dragon—you can’t kill him. I need him.”

Her gaze lingered on Eroan’s face. Fear, horror, he felt all the things she threw his way as though each was a precisely thrown knife. Standing, he pulled her to her feet. “Stow your weapons,” he told her, dropping his tone to one she’d know well. “He’s mine.”

She swallowed and blinked at Lysander. Eroan knew her thoughts. Why wasn’t this dragon dead? Why hadn’t Eroan killed him?

“I don’t understand,” she said.

Her blades were still free. She appeared relaxed, shocked even, but the second Lysander moved into striking distance, she would take the opportunity and go in for the kill again.

“Sheathe your daggers, Nylena.” This time, Eroan added weight to his words.

She flinched and backed away from them both. “I can’t do that.”

“Nylena, you should not be here.”

Lysander stepped forward, and Nylena brought her daggers up. Eroan held out a hand, urging the dragon back and took a step in, placing himself between the two of them. She could still fling those daggers sharp and true and she would not miss her target.

“What is this?” she asked. “It’s been weeks... When you failed—”

Those words struck like her daggers might. “I have not failed.”

“The queen still lives and you...” Her glare settled on the collar. “What are you? You are not one of us. Not any longer. They... own you.”

He should have expected the words, he’d been telling himself the same for weeks now, but it wasn’t what she thought. How could he tell her how he planned to kill more than the queen, how he would make them all fall, with the prince listening?

“Leave,” he ordered.

“You shame the Order.” She spat in the dirt.

Would that be how he was remembered? Would Janna weep not for his death, but for the ruined memory of him? He could let Nylena kill Lysander. A prince wasn’t a queen, but it would be a blow to her reign. Lysander blinked back at him now. He would not be easy to kill. Nylena wasn’t strong enough. Besides, this prince was too valuable. Eroan had worked to

win his trust. He could not afford for it all to be wasted. With Lysander's help, he *would* get to the queen.

"Nylena, you don't understand what's happening here. Leave these lands and tell the others not to come. They'll die, and we cannot afford—"

At first, when the ground shook and the air blasted over them, Eroan thought the storm had returned. Leaves tore at his face. He jerked an arm up, shielding his face but when he blinked grit from his eyes, a wall of shifting purple scales slammed down like a waterfall. Half-moon black claws spread wide and dragon's eyes shone like two blazing stars. The beast opened its jaws, rows of teeth glinting, each one the size of Lysander's swords. And then it struck, lightning fast, and where Nylena had been standing moments before, there was only dragon.

Eroan couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. The thing was too big, too close, too much of an enormous force to think around.

The beast reared higher and turned its wicked serpentine smile on him. Those eyes, so dark, bottomless pits of power and hunger and thirst that had wrecked worlds. And he knew those eyes. He'd stared into them as her magic had tried to smother him. Elisandra.

And Nylena was gone.

Another elf dead.

Rage. Foolish and all-consuming.

So many had fallen... so many proud warriors. So many he couldn't save because the queen still lived, and had he succeeded, Nylena would still be alive.

He didn't think. Didn't reason. Eroan strode forward.

A foot slammed down, blocking his path. Claws sank like sword blades into the earth and gouged out grooves.

Fear chipped at the sudden silence in his head.

He knelt, picked up one of Nylena's fallen daggers, and when he lifted his gaze, the queen of dragons peered down at him, mirth gleaming in her eyes.

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CHAPTER 15



Lysander

SHE WOULD KILL EROAN.

Lysander's heart thumped like it was trapped behind bars. He had the blades in his hands, but they were useless against her bulk. If he attacked as human, he'd be a distraction, nothing more. If he struck as dragon, she'd tear him to pieces. But he couldn't watch this... He tightened his grip on the blades. Perhaps distraction was the key, buy the elf time to see reason and run.

Eroan knelt, and for a moment relief lifted Lysander's heart. *Yes, kneel to her, it's the only way.* When he straightened, a dagger glinted in Eroan's hand, and the relief turned to lead in Lysander's gut. *No, you fool!* A silly little weapon, barely a toothpick. Eroan would die here. No, this wasn't right. The elf was too bright a thing, too strong, too proud, to die here. It couldn't happen. It *wouldn't* happen.

I keep saving him, but he keeps walking into the jaws of death.

Lysander was moving, running, although none of this felt real. His mother's gaze was fixed on the elf. In seconds, she could crush him, consume him. He'd die just as easily as his friend had.

Not this time, Mother.

A roar tore from his chest, voicing the broiling pit of rage burning him inside. He lifted the blades and plunged down into the back of Elisandra's

front foot.

Her bellow rocked the air, the skies, rocked Lysander's chest to his withered soul. He'd never heard a sweeter sound. She lifted her foot, and him with it, clinging to his blades. Air rushed, the ground fell away. If he fell, it might be the end of him, but he'd never felt more alive, more focused, as though some deeper instinct had a hold of him and was driving him forward. Magic and power sang through his veins, the shift calling, but he held it tight, held it close, and instead of freeing the truest part of him, he pulled a blade free, clutched to the other still lodged in her foot, and swung free. He might not make it, he realized, as he let go and fell. Didn't matter. His heart sang, falling... so free... He hit scales and scrabbled to grab hold of something. Anything.

The crown of bone about her head. He grabbed one of its forks. She threw her head high. Starlit skies swirled. His stomach dropped, body suddenly light. There was no clinging to her for long. She'd shake him free, but not before he drove the blade in his hand home.

Her scales hissed and rattled, and with a second sundering roar, she tore at her head, at him.

Lysander saw his moment. Clear. Precise. He tightened his grip on the sword. Calm certainty washed through him. She bowed her head, trying to shake him free. He let go—falling, skidding—sliding over scales, down to her brow, and there, he plunged the sword into the only soft part on a dragon's body. Her eye.

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CHAPTER 16



Eroan

IT WOULDN'T KILL HER, Eroan thought, as the prince plunged his sword home and true, but the prince must have known that. Why then? Why do this?

The Dragon Queen's screams sliced through Eroan's skull. He staggered under the onslaught of noise and stood frozen as the towering mass of dragon reared up, blocking out the sky. Lysander clung on, little more than a child's doll in her clutches.

Then he remembered the drunken moments, the careful words. *Nobody has cut his ropes.* The prince was trapped too. But this wasn't reason, this was madness. And why now, why here, surely not for... Eroan?

Eroan backed up. The queen threw her head back and forth, but when that didn't shake her parasite free, she tore her son from her eye, capturing him inside her fist, and slammed him into the forest floor. Pinned, he lay still, eyes open, staring at nothing. The queen roared over her kill, claiming her son's limp carcass as hers. And he was surely dead. Old fears, childish fears, urged Eroan to flee. He glanced at the dagger in his hand—so small a weapon in the face of her monstrosity. But he could do this, he could beat this creature alone. His whole life had been honed in pursuit of this moment. For the fallen, for those who hadn't returned, and for a broken prince.

Elisandra's head swiveled down, her gaze falling on Eroan once more. Behind her grin, purple fire burbled.

Attacking her head-on would get him killed alongside the prince. No. There was another way...

He dropped the dagger.

Elisandra huffed a rumbling growl. She swept her wounded foot in and closed her digits around Eroan, then closed tight. He let it happen, let her pull him close to her muzzle, let her peer down at him as though he were nothing but an insect in her clutches and let her grin, revealing rows of curved, lethal teeth, so close now he could reach out and touch one.

Teeth, shaped like Lysander's blades. His blades, Eroan realized, were made from dragon teeth. And one of those blades had pierced the scales on her foot and punctured her eye.

Her closed eye wept tears of blood. Tears for her son, perhaps.

Eroan closed his eyes, listened to her huge wings spread and draw in air, then beat, like thunder, as she took flight.

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CHAPTER 17



Lysander

LYSANDER KNEW ONLY PAIN. Broken as dragon and broken as man, he had nowhere to hide from the agony. Carline's healing hands rubbed at him like glass and blades and needles and all things made to make him howl and writhe. She tried, he knew she tried, but some things can't be healed. A choice, she had whispered to him in the darkest hours: Never walk as a man or never fly again as a dragon. A broken back or a broken wing? Pick one.

He couldn't.

And so he thrashed in pain for hours, days, weeks, into a timeless ocean of agony where there was nothing worth waking for.

Broken.

In so many ways.

In all ways.

Why wouldn't it end?

Someone nudged his leg and snuffled a gentle greeting. *Brother*, his instincts confirmed. Lysander stared at the wall, at every crack, every crumbling stone, chasing the veins in the tower rather than chasing the truth. Akiem—all magnificent black scale—plodded in front of him, lowered his head between his front feet, and looked Lysander in the eyes.

Lysander stared through his brother's golden eyes, through the wall, out into the space beyond where he would likely never fly again. He didn't

want to make this choice. Why hadn't Mother killed him? He couldn't keep on fighting when there was nothing left worth fighting for.

Akiem was gone now, and so were the days and nights. Was the elf gone too? Had she killed him like he'd feared? Eroan. Stupid, stubborn Eroan. Lysander's dreams shifted from cold to warm, and the pain faded, just for a little while. He saw Eroan's gaze through firelight, saw the elf gently smile at some silly thing he'd said about eggs and princes. Lysander couldn't remember the words, but he remembered the thawing feeling those words had gifted him. Like there was something else beyond this hell, some other hope.

"Kit. Dear little kit. You must choose. I cannot choose for you," Carline soothed.

Lysander let his lips ripple a warning to stay away, to leave him be, let him rot for all he cared.

"I cannot see you do this to yourself. You're wasting to nothing. What good does your death do, Lysander? Survive and find a way."

Good? What good was there in the world now? Amalia had been good. Her laughter had once brightened the tower. And Elisandra had ripped her out of the brood as if she were some cancerous thing, but her only crime had been to search for light and love in a world void of those things.

Lysander heard Carline sigh, then she was gone, and the dreams swirled again, but this time Lysander smelled pine and freshly cut wood, and the rain. Eroan. In here, in his dreams, it didn't matter what Lysander thought or who he admired. In here, he had the elf in chains again, but this time the elf wanted it, and Lysander tasted his mouth one careful, testing kiss at a time. Fire wrapped around his heart, pumping hot blood through his veins, filling his limbs with feeling. Not too much, just enough to lift his head above the dreams.

"Is he alive?" Lysander asked, not even sure who he was asking or how many times he had asked it. "The elf..."

"It's alive," Carline said.

It. Right. Because it was such a crime to think of anything other than dragon as worthy of a name.

Lysander fluttered his eyes open. He couldn't recall turning back to human, couldn't recall the room around him, with its white-washed walls and waxy smell rising from a dozen candles.

Carline knelt at his bedside, wringing out a wet cloth. The lines in her face had gotten harder and her lips paler. Much of her bundle of silvery-peppered hair had escaped its band. A sadness clung to her. He reached out a hand and smiled when she placed hers in his. Her fingers closed, but her sadness only thickened when she met his gaze.

“There was nothing I could do.” Her hand squeezed his and let go. She gathered her rag, bowl and skirts, and left with her words ringing around him. *Nothing she could do?*

He threw his hand back and tried to swallow around the knot in his throat. The choice. A broken wing or a broken back. Fear pinned him still. Either choice was one he couldn’t live with. But which had he chosen? He looked down himself, at the bedsheet with its dips and valleys and there at the end, the sheet steepled over his toes. He could feel his legs, couldn’t he? Breathing in, he held still and stretched his toes. The sheet shifted.

He’d lost his wing then. Or at least the use of it.

His mouth twisted. He pinched his lips closed then bit into his bottom lip to stop it from trembling.

His flight. His freedom.

He knew. That part of him felt dislodged. Broken inside. There would be no more flying, no more soaring over the forests, no more tasting the wind, letting it caress his scales. Without it, he might as well be a chained thing, a trapped thing.

He threw off the sheet and planted his feet on the floor. What was he then, if not dragon?

A hollowness gnawed at his chest. He wanted to tear the wrongness out of himself, wanted to sink his fingers into something and rip it to shreds.

Sinking his hands into his hair, he rocked while his thoughts unraveled. He couldn’t stay together, couldn’t hold it in, this slippery feeling that his life was falling away from him. The tears fell, like the rest of him, forever falling. He was breaking apart, turning to dust, becoming nothing.

The moan wasn’t his, couldn’t be his. All feeling leaked away, fleeing with his tears and moans and cries into an empty room. *Let it go, let it all go. It can’t hurt anymore if there’s nothing left to break.*



LYSANDER STOOD at a window and stared over the scorched lands to the green and plump forests far beyond, turning golden now the days were shortening. He had always liked autumn. Warm air during the day, but bitterly cold at night. Ice had nipped at his wings when he'd lingered too long in the air, giving his flight a sharp edge he'd often chased.

There would be no more flying... ever.

"Lysander..." Elisandra summoned.

He turned away from the vista back into the gloom of the tower chamber. "Yes, Mother."

"Your escorts will arrive in three days. I suggest you ready yourself for the coupling."

He blinked at her, his thoughts taking a moment to return from his memories. It always surprised him how the amethyst replacing her right eye had a depth to it her true eye never had. She wore her hair down these days and often let it curtain half her face, making that jewel-eye seem like a tantalizing secret. It was no secret, of course, though how she had lost her eye was. By the time he had woken from his stupor, half a thing, she had spun a legend of some great old-world beast that had struck at the heart of her lands. Nobody cared enough about Lysander to think it a coincidence how he too was wounded. She lost an eye. He lost half his life.

"Did you hear me?" she snapped.

"Yes, Mother."

"Good." Her poisonous lips curled into a smile. "Now then..." Her gaze turned sly. "I have a little task. Something I think you can help with. Would you like that, my dear?"

"Of course."

Frustration fluttered her cheek. "Would it kill you to smile once in a while?"

He headed for the door, not caring he hadn't been dismissed. "No, Mother."

"Come to the hall this evening. I have a parting gift for you," she called after him.

He let the chamber door clang shut as answer.

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CHAPTER 18



Eroan

EROAN COULDN'T REMEMBER the last time he'd seen the light. Weeks. Months. His skin sizzled, muscles trembling, his body shrinking around the husk he was becoming. His mind too. He'd thought, perhaps foolishly, that the queen would take him back to her chamber, bind him in leather straps and it would be as before. He'd be a part of her harem and closer than ever. But that hadn't happened. Instead, she'd locked him somewhere dark, somewhere cold, somewhere like the dungeon, only this time the prince hadn't come. Nobody had. And with every second trapped away from light and life, Eroan felt his strength wither and curl inward.

When the dragons finally did come, he could barely lift himself from the mire of his mind. Hands shoved and pulled—every touch a brand—and he couldn't find the energy to fight. They could do anything to him, he realized, and he couldn't stop them. Couldn't lift a hand to plead to see the queen, to let him have that one last chance at killing her.

Nylena had been right. He wasn't Eroan of the Order any longer. Now he was a ghost of a thing. He ached for the light, to feel it on his skin, to breathe it in and let it fill him up so he knew he still lived and this wasn't some wretched afterlife.

Dragonkin tore his soiled clothes off and led him into a deep walk-in bath. Warm water lapped up his thighs. Steam twirled, and he wondered if

the males were steam too, or were they real? They moved like smoke. Hands were on him, caressing him, sweeping the dirt off his skin, roaming intimately so that nothing was missed. He briefly thought of the old dragon, Carline, and how he had once thought to stop her from touching him. It was different then. *He* was different then. He'd had a fire inside. But the prison had snuffed out that light.

"They have pretty eyes." The dragonkin male's face was all he could see suddenly. His eyes were slitted, like a snake's, and wide with want.

Eroan lay his head back against the pool's edge and fluttered his eyes closed. Let them have him. Water sloshed. Hands roamed his chest, kneading over his hips and boldly massaging between his legs. His thoughts fluttered too, thoughts of another's touch, so long ago, of Janna and how they'd laughed, tangled together. He'd plucked leaves from her hair, and she'd kissed him on the lips... No, that wasn't him. That was someone else's life, someone who had a purpose, a proud and strong male. The memory of Eroan Ilanea.

Kill the queen.

Until it is done.

He'd lived for the Order. Now he was a husk, a ghost without purpose.

The dragonkin's hand stroked, stoking heat awake low in his stomach, way down low, and he couldn't find it in him to think around the pleasure of feeling something, anything. The dragonkin nursed the spark in him, using his thumb to run up his thick swelling shaft. Eroan could wallow in this warmth. It had been so long since anyone had touched him. So long, he'd feared he'd been forgotten forever.

His thoughts drifted while something important plucked at their edges. The dragonkin's hand tightened, pleasure throbbed, and Eroan arched into his grip. This was wrong. He wasn't here for this, for them. There was another reason for him being here... one he'd almost lost in the dark. It was important. It was everything. If he could just think...

The dragonkin straddled his thighs, gripped his arousal and lowered himself over him.

Wait.

Eroan gasped and gripped the male's shoulders. The dragonkin's eyes flashed.

What had they done to him? The water, was it that? The steam? He couldn't think through the fog, the heat, the want, but he knew, inside, this

was wrong.

“Stop,” he mumbled and pushed at the male’s slippery chest.

The dragonkin seated himself over him, and took him in, inch by careful inch. “Oh no, elf,” the dragon purred. “We do not stop for you.”

Tight pleasure coiled in Eroan’s belly, a pleasure that sickened and sweetened all at once. He tried to push, to twist away, but his head spun, and the fog swelled. A hand captured Eroan’s jaw, holding him pinned. And the dragonkin rocked his hips, taking him inside in aching tightness, riding him out.

The second male moved closer, easing into Eroan’s vision. A slippery vision of muscles and masculine lines. He stroked his nipples and then lowered his hand toward the waterline to massage his arousal.

What was this madness?

Pleasure spun tighter, building, hardening. Eroan couldn’t do this, not with them. There would be nothing left of him if they took this too.

“You like that,” the dragon riding him said. “I feel that you do. Don’t resist us.”

The strength came at him out of the dark, a sudden surge of anger and hatred. He punched the balls of his palms into the male’s chest, flinging him backward into the water and out of sight beneath the choppy surface. But the second was on him suddenly, his mouth hot and sharp as it claimed Eroan’s. It burned. Stole more of him. Pleasure trilled. He didn’t want this, but he couldn’t seem to make the thoughts get through to his skin, to his body. Still hard, the second male plunged his head under water and took him in his wet, hot mouth.

“No... no...” Eroan had his hands in the male’s hair and meant to pull him off, but the dragon’s tongue licked and flicked, tearing a groan from Eroan.

And then, *she* was there.

Dressed in black lace. Lips blood red. One eye amethyst, like her scales, like her fire. He hadn’t heard her enter, hadn’t seen her walk around the bath to stand opposite. But she was there now, as real as the dragonkin taking Eroan’s arousal in so damn deep it brushed the back of the male’s throat.

“Out,” the queen snapped at the dragonkin lurking nearby. The male jogged from the pool, his head bowed. He padded naked, out of sight.

Eroan dared not take his eyes from the queen.

The second male, the one with Eroan's cock in his mouth, twitched beneath Eroan's hand, still holding him down.

Eroan stared at the queen. He imagined it was her head he held underwater, her lips around his hard need. The fire in her one remaining eye and the smile on her lips told him she knew his thoughts. Maddening ecstasy spooled tighter. Eroan pushed the male's head deeper and arched his arousal deeper, choking the beast.

The dragonkin's teeth sank in. Pain burst behind Eroan's eyes.

Eroan kicked out and jolted from the pool on flimsy, weak legs. His footing slipped. He staggered, almost fell, and then she had him by the back of his collar, yanking him up and back like a pet on a leash.

"That rat almost killed me!" the male in the pool spluttered and wheezed.

Elisandra slammed Eroan face-first into a wall. "What did you expect?" the queen laughed. "Foolish thing." She leaned in, molding herself against him. Her breasts pushed against his back, her hip against his ass. "A little test," she hissed into this ear, "to see if there was any fight left in Eroan Ilanea."

The queen let go, but Eroan stayed pressed against the chilling wall, needing it to hold him up.

"Get him dressed," the queen barked. "A loose shirt. Let Lysander see how his pet quivers."

Lysander.

The prince was alive. Feeling thawed Eroan's heart into something warm and bright again. When the prince hadn't come during those long hours in darkness, he'd assumed she'd killed him in the forest. To hear he was alive...

Eroan turned and let the queen see all of him, see the pride in his eyes even as shivers wrecked him. Naked and wet but for the collar at his neck, he stood exposed and raw, but she saw the fire.

Her good eye twitched wider. The queen drank him in, inch by careful inch, as though committing every hard curve of his muscular design to memory. "Make no mistake. I'm not doing this for you, elf, or him. He will perform, and his childish actions have consequences. You're going to help me with that." She tilted her head and eyed him side-on. "Bring him to me after the celebration," she told her males. Males he hadn't even noticed had been here all along.

She clicked her fingers and the dragonkin scurried off, returning moments later with towels and clothing. In those moments, Eroan hadn't taken his eyes from the queen. This was progress. To see her again, to be this close. She would soon have him closer, and in those moments, opportunity would come. He panted in anticipation, his body buzzing with life like the hit he usually got from basking in daylight, until the room tipped, and the queen's laughter set his thought spinning. He went down onto his knees. No, no... He could not appear so weak!

"Feed him," she chuckled. "Do what's necessary. I can't have him passing out... yet."

She left, and more dragonkin came in. Three attended him. He let them dry him, let them dress him and braid his hair while inside, vengeance fueled a fire of his making. None tried to touch him again. He smiled, garnering odd looks from the dragons. Among all of this madness, he'd won a small victory, and the queen hadn't realized.

Feed him.

Him.

Not it.



DRESSED, fed and dry, the guards led Eroan down corridors, toward distant mumblings that reminded him of ocean waves. With every step, warmth spilled back into his veins, filling him and chasing away the lethargy. Perhaps it was the firelight from the torches or being around company, or more likely it was having a purpose again that drove him forward. But all those thoughts chilled at the sight of the crowd and the wooden stocks.

The stench hit him then. Dragonkin and hot, sizzling meat. The hall was full of the beasts. Some looked his way as he was marched in. So many. Countless. Males. Females. Even a few younger kits. They lay about the room or were seated at the long table, suitable for a hundred at least. There had to be hundreds here, gathered around, watching from archways, balconies, from every window looking inward.

Instincts had Eroan baring his teeth for all the good it did him. The stocks came down, clamping his wrists and neck tight. Trapped, panic tried to rattle through his bones. But he would not let them see him weak.

Whatever was about to happen, it would end, and he would be with the queen afterward. Close to her. He'd do anything if it meant he could crush her neck in his hands. All he had to endure was this and the never-ending night of monsters would be over soon.

His gaze snagged on furious green eyes.

Prince Lysander. He stood as still as stone while his kind flowed around him, like water around rock.

Eroan lifted his chin. He still clung to his pride like a shield and showed it to Lysander now, but the prince barely blinked.

A hush came over the room and a chill with it. And still, Lysander stared, his face a deliberate mask, nothing like the animated, relaxed prince from before. Something had happened to him, something to lend him that steel he'd spoken off all those weeks or months ago.

"My dragons, my brood..." Elisandra glided in from Eroan's right, the hem of her lace dress trailing behind her. "We are here to celebrate the joining of two great lines, to celebrate my son's venture on behalf of the amethyst."

She held a coiled whip at her side. He could hardly miss it as she crossed the floor in front of him. She had a destination in mind, and as she reached the table where Lysander had risen, she held the whip out to her son.

"For your new joining," the queen explained, and then louder for them all to hear. "A gift to the bronze for the regrettable deaths of their kin. Deaths wrought by this elf."

Lysander looked down, blinked once, his brow creasing, then carefully took the whip from his mother's hands.

"Fifty lashes," the queen declared. "Ten for each bronze killed."

"Yes, Mother," the prince said. When he looked up, there was nothing in his eyes but cold, hard steel.

CHAPTER 19



Lysander

THE WHIP FELT soft and supple in Lysander's hands, but he knew all too well how it liked to bite. He gathered its coils in his left hand and rubbed at his chin with his right, using the motion to wipe off a sneer and replace it with a smile his mother would find more appealing.

The dragonkin watched their prince approach the elf locked in the stocks. His mother watched too, her one-eyed gaze burning into his back. They all fucking watched. Even the elf. The elf who should have fled when he had the chance. The elf who was a damned fool. He had brought this on himself.

Excited, breathless murmurs rippled through his kin. Lysander hated them all, but most of all, he hated himself.

He swallowed, let the whip's coils drop with a wet sounding slap to the floor, and gripped the handle tighter. He had felt nothing for so long, nothing since he'd roared out his hurt alone in that room, and now this. He could not feel here either. They would sense weakness. His mother would sense weakness.

He drifted around the stocks, dragging the whip's tails with him.

Fifty lashes.

Fifty lashes for five dead bronze. Three, he'd killed. Two, Eroan had dispatched. Although the bronze found with his shriveled cock in his mouth

had been more of a dual effort.

While Lysander had been holed up licking his wounds, Dokul had demanded justice. Well, here it was. To deny the bronze their bloodlust would start a war. It didn't matter they shouldn't have taken the elf in the first place. In the name of peace, Lysander had to cleave the elf's back to shreds.

Akiem drifted toward Elisandra. He kept his voice low, but Lysander heard. "Let me," his brother whispered. Something dark twisted inside Lysander.

Elisandra ignored him, and Lysander's smile cut deeper. The last thing he needed was Akiem driving the lashes into Eroan. Like this, he could at least control the damage. And there would be damage. There was no escaping it. Just like there was no escaping every-*fucking*-thing in this tower.

Akiem joined his mother, and both of them watched him now, waiting for him to fail. Lysander jerked the whip back and snapped it down. With a vicious crack, it tore into Eroan's back. The elf jolted, rattling the stocks. Thick silence followed.

Blood crept down Eroan's back, soaking through his shirt.

Lysander tightened his hand on the whip to keep the tremors from showing. His chest heaved from the voice in his head screaming at him to stop, that this was wrong, but to his kin, it looked like rage.

He'd wanted to see Eroan again, but not like this. He'd wanted to sit with him by the fire like they had when they were alone. He had wanted to know more about the elves, about why the elf Nylena had looked at Eroan with such pride in her eyes before she'd thought... what? That he'd become Lysander's pet?

Why didn't you run?!

Another lash. Another jerk. Fabric and skin split apart.

The elf should have run. Lysander would have—he should have taken the skies when he had the chance, and now that chance was taken from him. Because of this elf's stubborn mission. A doomed mission. All the elves died and this one would too.

Another lash. The whip cracked. Eroan grunted, panted. His shoulders heaved and trembled. As Lysander drew the whip back, blood rained across the floor.

Be cold. Be hard. Be steel.

He lashed again.

Be steel.

And again.

And again.



THE REVELRY CONTINUED, all in Lysander's name. He faked his smiles, his laughs, like he wore steel on the outside too. Time stretched long and thin, and with every second, the elf's blood dripped, pooling beneath the stocks. He'd fallen unconscious after the first twenty lashes. After thirty, there was little left of the elf's back. Lysander had almost thrown up his dinner by the fiftieth lash but had somehow kept it down, hidden it all inside.

He wasn't even sure if the elf still breathed. He couldn't look. None of this was supposed to matter. The elf was a tool. A plaything.

His kin wandered around Eroan in stocks and laughed, and Lysander curled his fingers into fists. He hated them. Hated them all. But his hate for Elisandra was a blinding, powerful force. His kind tried to speak with him. He blanked them all, and with every heartbeat, the hateful knot tightened, choking off all feeling. If he stayed too long, he'd do something foolish.

Sometime in the evening, his mother's assistants unlocked Eroan from the stocks and carried the elf's limp body out of the hall. Maybe they'd throw him away. Maybe his mother would finish him off. If Lysander were more like Akiem, or any other dragon, he wouldn't have cared.

But Lysander wasn't like them, any of them... He couldn't allow it. In a few more days, he'd be gone from this wretched place to somewhere Elisandra couldn't reach him. Before he left, he'd do something worthwhile, something to make up for every terrible lash of that whip.

"Lysander... Is everything all right?"

He turned away from his kin's question, set his tankard down on the table and left the hall, careful not to break into a run. Panic gripped his heart.

What if it was too late? His pace quickened, boots thumping on stone.

Akiem stepped out of a side-door, blocking him. "Stop."

Lysander shoved his brother aside and ran faster, heart racing. And there, he made it to the stairs below his mother's tower where the assistants

were hauling Eroan's unconscious body between them. "New orders! You're to bring him—it with me."

Narrowed eyes regarded him. "Queen Elisandra said—"

Lysander planted his feet and allowed some of the magic to burn through his gaze, knowing it made his glare sharper, his eyes harder. The twin blades at his back warmed, eager to be freed.

They still wavered because whatever he said, whatever he threatened them with, he wasn't Elisandra.

"Do it." Akiem breezed behind Lysander. "And hurry about it. The queen hates delays."

One brother they could argue with, but not two. Lysander briefly met his brother's gaze and saw a similar anger reflected there. Akiem had likely only helped him to keep him momentarily safe from Elisandra's claws, or maybe he was curious. Whatever the reason, he certainly wasn't stepping in for the elf's benefit. Akiem would make him pay for this, but whatever cost, it would be worth it.

The assistants followed, descending deeper into the tower's heart. Lysander hammered on a closed chamber door and heard familiar grumbles from inside. Good, she was in, and she wouldn't turn him away.

Carline opened the door, squinted at the princes and the bloody elf and let out a deep wearisome sigh. "You amethyst kits, always bringing trouble to my door." She stepped aside.

Lysander ripped the sheet off the bed. "Here." The assistants dumped Eroan's body on the bed like the elf was trash. He barely reined in the rage. "Get out!" They scurried out, probably already thinking of the cleanest way to tell Elisandra all about Lysander's latest indiscretion.

"Light a fire, prince," Carline said, rolling up her sleeves. She approached the bed and Eroan's prone body.

Akiem glanced at Lysander.

Carline waved a hand. "Either of you. Doesn't matter, just do it."

Lysander assembled the kindling, tossing it into the fireplace grate, anything to keep his mind off what he was doing here. Bringing Eroan here couldn't be another mistake. It felt right. And nothing had felt right in weeks.

"It's not yours..." Akiem propped himself against the wall beside the fireplace and looked down his nose. "She'll punish you."

Laughter tickled Lysander's throat. He snapped a bundle of twigs in two and tossed those into the grate. "What else can she do, brother?" He took the firestarter from his back pocket and paused with it between his fingers. He'd kept it all this time, through the pain, through the long darkness. A darkness he had yet to climb out of.

"Why?" Akiem asked.

Lysander struck the flint, sending sparks flying, and nursed the resulting tiny flames, feeding them fuel, making the flames higher, brighter, hotter, until the fire had a hold of the wood and filled the gate.

"Just let it die," Akiem whispered. "It's kinder if that's what you're worried about."

"No." Lysander straightened and gripped the mantle. He breathed in wood smoke, the same kinda of smoke that had filled their camp. Memories fluttered about him like ghosts.

"Then why?!" Akiem snarled.

He turned his head to meet his brother's gaze. Akiem thought him weak, always had. Siblings killed the weakest one, but when Akiem had tried, he'd learned Lysander bit back. Even now, Lysander saw the hatred in his brother's eyes. It had never left.

He looked over his shoulder at Carline carefully peeling off strips of the elf's shirt. Eroan lay on his chest, an arm hanging off the bed, blood dripping from his limp fingers, his white hair fanned out and matted with blood. If he died... it would break him open.

"If he dies, so does the last of my hope." Lysander watched confusion twist Akiem's expression and felt his hate knot into something ugly inside. "I don't expect you to understand, you never have."

"It's not even dragon." Akiem's eyes flashed. "It's an elf. You do realize that?" Disgust had him recoiling. "You want to fuck him, is that it? Find a horse to fuck out your sick lust if you must. This is... this is twisted—"

The hate blazed, suddenly breaking free. Lysander threw a punch. It cracked satisfyingly against Akiem's jaw, but his brother never had gone down easy and was on him in a next blink, his cold hand at Lysander's throat. They grappled, but Akiem's strength always won out.

Lysander's back hit the wall. Akiem pinned him still, like a kit caught by the scruff of the neck. "You're going to get yourself killed! Is that what you want?!" Akiem breathed in and finally loosened his grip, allowing Lysander to breathe again.

“She’s not going to kill me,” he spluttered. “She needs me to spread my seed through the bronze. Afterward...” He rubbed at his neck. “Maybe.”

“There’s a limit, Lysander.”

“I took her fucking eye, brother. I reached that limit weeks ago.”

Akiem suddenly stepped back. “*You* did that? You mutilated her?”

Had his brother really not seen the obvious, and hadn’t he cared enough to see? He straightened his shirt with a shrug. “Oh, don’t look so shocked.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Lysander laughed. “I killed the bronze. The ones Eroan hadn’t gotten to yet. I suppose you want to know why I did that too. You don’t understand. You can’t understand because you’ve always had control of your life. You don’t feel like you’re falling every day, you’re Prince Akiem! Elisandra’s beloved, the crown’s favorite!” Lysander laughed and didn’t care that it twisted and turned ugly. “You have a brood, you have power. I have nothing and no one, and now she sells me to the fucking bronze like I’m no better than breeding stock. I thought I could be her prince. I thought I could live a lie. I can’t!”

“That’s ridiculous. None can match you in battle. Our flights admire you for that...”

If nothing else. The way he trailed off, they both knew there was more to that sentence.

“I’m not like you. I’m broken, Akiem. Some days I don’t know who I am, but it sure isn’t amethyst.”

“Will you both stop!” Carline snapped, rising to her feet. Her hands glistened with blood. “I used to throw you both over my knee and whip those little asses of yours until they were pink as peaches. Akiem, shut up and listen to your brother or you’ll lose him. And Lysander, quit your complaining. This elf is dying. Help me save it or leave.”

Akiem’s brow pinched at the old dragon’s disrespectful words. When it was clear she had no intention of apologizing, he swung his heated glare back to Lysander. “That elf will be the death of you and I’ll have no hand in it.” He left, slamming the door so hard it almost bounced off its hinges.

“Good, that’s him gone,” Carline drew in a breath and planted her hands on her hips. “Now, help me save him like I know you can.”

CHAPTER 20



Eroan

BLOOD-SOAKED dreams punctured by whip cracks. They boiled and simmered around him, never seeming to end.

Eroan wasn't ready to give up, not yet. He dreamed of a time when he knew nothing but pain, when the Order had found him, starved and wretched, crying in the rain. He hadn't given up then. He dreamed of sending proud, fierce warriors to their deaths and how he'd ached to bring them back, to stop them. But there was no end then, and there couldn't be one now.

"You don't get to end it now. It's not yet done," a voice told him, a voice that somehow found him in the blood-soaked nightmares.

He dreamed of hands on his skin, of lashes slicing through muscle, of a mouth teasing his, of desires and hungers and things yet to be known but he had yearned for all the same. He dreamed of a prince with green eyes full of wonder but also regret. And when he woke, the prince was sitting on the floor, propped against the wall beside a roaring fireplace, his chin on his rising and falling chest, arms folded, eyes closed.

Eroan blinked, wondering if he had conjured this room and the prince. That thought floated, anchorless and free.

"You'll feel a little out of sorts, elf. It's the valerian root. But you'll live."

He shifted his head and recognized the older woman seated at the foot of the bed. She smelled of mead and wood smoke and had the cracks and lines of a hard life mapping her face. The ghost of her healing tingled down his back. Her little smile touched that wrecked, lonely part of him. Just a tiny smile, but it tied him up in knots to see it.

She jerked her chin toward Lysander. "He's exhausted. I wouldn't have been able to save you without him."

He rolled his tongue around his parched mouth. "He did... this... to me." He heard the whip cracks. Felt his back burn.

"Foolish elf," Carline muttered. "He suffered, just like you have. Perhaps more so. Do you think he's never felt that whip lashing his back? Do you think, in that healing haze you're in, that Lysander is free to say no to the queen?"

He hadn't considered it, and when the first lashes had struck, he'd hated them all, Lysander included. He scowled at the old dragon as she rose and brought him a cup. Cradling his head, she helped him drink. Just a few sweet sips, but even that small motion was almost too much for his spinning thoughts. Mead? What was wrong with these dragons? Did they never drink water? "Trying to... get me drunk, old woman?" His voice scratched his tongue and throat.

She rolled her eyes. "Trying to ease your pain, elf."

"I have... a name." He fell onto his back, or tried to until his shoulders blazed as though someone was running knife blades down his spine. Wincing, he coughed out, "Eroan Ilanea."

She set the cup on a bedside table and pulled her chair closer. "Truth be told, I thought you were sure to die, *Eroan*."

He blinked at her face, not so different from the elders of his home village, and waited for the pain to ebb. "You healed me?"

"No. Well, yes. Some." She leaned back, and something in the way she smiled down at him had Eroan wondering what else she wanted to say but clearly couldn't. "We don't breed healers," she added. "Not anymore."

He knew, but let her speak, enjoying the softness of her voice, the warmth of the sheet and the comforting firelight.

"Weakness is cut out of a brood before it can fester," she continued, placing her healers' hands in her lap. "Lysander was destined for death the second he tore from the egg. The older, Akiem, tried it. He survived. I watched him then too. Others have tried to kill him, he's always survived.

He has a passion for life but lately..." A shadow passed over her face. "Passion can only get a dragon so far."

"Why are you telling me this?" he whispered, trying to ease the soreness in his throat. He didn't remember crying out but must have.

Carline pursed her lips. "You stole my knife."

Eroan let his lips lift into a smile and Carline's mirrored his. She likely knew what he'd done with that knife too.

"You're a slippery thing, Eroan. I was sure you'd die like all the others and yet here you are, months later, your heart still beatin'. I see why he fights for you, even if it's foolish. Like you are foolish."

He laughed then choked on the sound as something inside twisted.

Carline leaned forward. Her smile cooled. "Lysander is a diamond in the rough. Even broken, he is worth a thousand amethyst." The dregs of laughter hardened in her fierce eyes. "I have tried to protect him, tried to steer him right, but like all dragons, he is stubborn. You have that in common."

Eroan let her words sink in and felt as though there was something else inside of them, some greater meaning he didn't understand. He missed the clearness of his thoughts, missed Alumn's light guiding him. He tried to recall the smell of rain and couldn't. All he could smell was dragon and mead.

"Queen Elisandra is a curse upon this land," Carline said, catching Eroan's wandering thoughts. "It was never meant to be this way."

He turned his head and looked closer at this old beast wearing a human face. Something else was happening here, a moment in time that would ring into the future, but he couldn't clear his head enough to grasp a hold of it. "What do you want from me?"

"Protect him. He won't ask for it and will fight you at every step, but you must protect him. He is the future."

Eroan lifted his gaze to the ceiling, feeling the world tip. "Alumn did not bring me here to protect dragons." *She brought me here to kill them.*

Carline chuckled. "Alumn, or fate, whatever you call her, often gives us the things we need exactly when we need them, but we must have our eyes wide open to recognize her gifts. You need him now, same as he needs you, elf. You must simply... open your eyes."

Eroan blinked, and she was gone, her words still fluttering about him like moths in the night. His thoughts cleared, the fire crackled in its grate,

the sound sharp in the quiet of the room. Lysander still slept, but there was no sign of the old healer.

He lifted his head. The empty chair was back at the end of the bed. His cup sat on the bedside table. He tasted mead on his tongue. At least, he thought he did. Had he dreamed her?

You need him now...

Her words haunted him as he watched the sleeping prince. Words of protection, words hinting at more. Lysander had been the one to strike each crack of the whip... and now he was here, had been here all along...

Even if he wanted to protect this prince, how could he in a tower full of dragons? Carline's words made no sense. They must have been dreams, he dismissed. Nothing more, and when he closed his eyes, he fell into those dreams again, only this time, they wrapped comfortingly around him.



SUNLIGHT.

Eroan almost wept as light stroked over his face. Clouds sailed across clear blue skies. He closed his eyes and let his lips part, let the warmth feed into his skin. The prince was behind him, standing guard, his presence the only thing anchoring Eroan to the earth, to the now. Life and strength swelled inside him. So long in darkness, so long alone...

He dropped to his knees in the dew-soaked grass and spread his fingers through the vibrant green blades. So little a thing, to feel, but he hadn't been sure he'd feel much of anything again, until now. He bowed forward and breathed in, inflating withered lungs.

Shudders spilled through him, lifting the fine hairs on his arms. He'd been a ghost for so long he'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be whole again.

I am Eroan Ilanea. Assassin of the Order. And I still live. Until it is done.

A shadow fell over him. He lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the glare and absorbed the sight of Lysander's dark outline. The sunlight blinked behind his head, but between shimmers, Eroan caught the strangest smile on the prince's lips.

"We can't stay here," the prince said.

“Moments more...” He wouldn’t beg, though he ached to. “Just... a few moments more.”

Lysander offered his hand. “She’ll come.”

The way he said it, he made it sound like it was inevitable, and Eroan supposed it was. He took the prince’s hand and accepted the help onto his feet.

“Are you all right?”

Eroan smiled through the shivers. Good shivers. Life sang through his veins, setting him ablaze once more inside. Was he all right? He wanted to laugh, to throw his arms wide and bask in daylight, but Lysander still had hold of his hand, and he found he didn’t want to let it go. If Carline’s words had been real, he owed this prince his life. “Thank you.”

Lysander’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. Color touched his face and a shine brightened his eyes, or perhaps that was the touch of sunlight on his skin too. “Don’t thank me.” He jerked his head. “I...” He held his tongue and swallowed whatever he’d been about to say. “We should get back.”

Eroan let his hand slip from Lysander’s grip. A strange residual tingle lingered on his fingertips. He curled his hand against his palm, savoring the tantalizing sensation. It reminded Eroan of when he’d woken, his skin alive with a similar hypersensitivity. He’d assumed it was Carline’s healing touch, but Lysander’s touch, just then, had felt the same.

The prince’s eyes darkened. A frown upset his easy smile. “Come, before we’re seen.”

Eroan’s steps felt heavy. He was in no hurry to return to the darkness behind those stone walls. He lingered, breathing in the light, and hadn’t realized he’d stopped again until he opened his eyes and found Lysander so close, he saw how delicate the dragon’s lashes were, dark accents over jewel eyes.

“Elf,” the prince growled, “you’re going to be the death of me.”

The anger in Lysander’s eyes shifted from light to dark in a blink, and that darkness flowed deep, so deep, where something dangerous lurked. The dragon hid deep inside that cave, so well buried that Eroan had briefly forgotten the man standing in front of him was a monster, one he’d dedicated his life to killing.

Lysander’s gaze flicked down. Eroan touched the thick leather collar around his own neck and an odd, absent look passed over the prince’s face.

“Who were you?” Lysander asked. “Before you came here to die.”

“Someone like you. Someone full of pride and honor who thought he could save others.”

Lysander laughed softly, and a startling burst of light sparked in Eroan’s chest at the deep, chuckling sound. Out here, alone but together, Eroan could almost believe this prince with his half-smile and haunted silences was something other than the monster. But he’d seen the coldness in him, felt it at the crack of a whip too. “You think that’s funny?”

“You know what I think is funny,” the prince grinned, “that the two most foolish creatures on this earth somehow found one another.”

Eroan let his own careful smile play on his lips. “You sound like that Carline.”

“She spoke to you, huh?” Lysander asked. They fell into an easy stride back toward the tower walls.

“She did. It was her knife I used to kill the first bronze when they stole me from the queen’s chamber.”

A sly look came over the prince, and a delightful mischief brightened his face. “Don’t be fooled. Carline’s the oldest thing in this tower. If she likes you, it’s probably because she’s measuring you for roasting.”

He believed it. “I don’t think she cares for the taste of elf.”

Lysander laughed again, and Eroan caught himself wanting to touch that smile, to feel its corner beneath his thumb. He pulled himself away, confusion muddying his thoughts, and gazed over the courtyard garden. The tower walls loomed behind him. Impossibly high. He breathed in, taking the fresh air in deep. It might be the last free breath he took.

In the corner of his eye, he noticed Lysander watching him and how the prince’s smile had fallen away, replaced by a long, intense look that had Eroan’s breaths shortening. This was... He stopped that thought and shoved it away. He shouldn’t be feeling this kernel of need toward a dragon. The prince was one of *them*. And he could be cruel, like them. He’d seen it. Felt the lash of his cruelty still. No, whatever wants Eroan was feeling had more to do with the sun on his face than twisted desire. If anything, he should be thinking of Janna.

He closed his eyes and remembered Janna’s light laugh, felt her fluttering kiss brush his lips and heard his last words to her: *I’m sorry*.

CHAPTER 21



Lysander

FEAR HELD Lysander rooted to the spot and kept his hands locked at his sides. Fear that if he took a single step closer, if he lifted his hand and tucked that stray curl of white hair back behind Eroan's tipped-ear, it wouldn't stop there. He'd turn the elf's face toward him, and if Eroan didn't stop him, he'd taste those soft lips like he'd ached to since he'd first seen the elf in chains. And if he still wasn't stopped, he'd explore that mouth, and when he was done there, he'd sweep the elf's hair back and taste the curve of his neck.

Eroan lifted his head like he had minutes earlier and fluttered his eyes closed, and all Lysander could think of was how he wanted to run his tongue down the defined jaw, nip at its edges, and make the elf whisper his name.

When Eroan had stood in the sunlight, suddenly aglow with life and light like some divine creature, Lysander had felt the world tip for a different reason, for a new feeling. He wasn't sure when it had happened... Maybe since Eroan's blades had clashed with his swords and they'd fought outside the queen's chamber, maybe later, when he'd tasted Eroan's mouth and heard the elf threaten to kill him. Maybe when he'd freed him, maybe when he'd saved him from the bronze, and he'd watched Eroan exact his revenge, or when he'd spent hour after hour cleaning the terrible gashes—

gashes Lysander was responsible for. Maybe it was the sum of all those parts, or maybe it had begun long before that. Before they'd met, and Lysander had just been waiting for someone to try to kill him so he knew what it felt like to truly be alive. Whenever it had clicked into place, he knew it now. A dangerous need, a willingness to protect no matter the cost. He admired Eroan, the foolish elf and his persistence, but it was more... so much more than admiration.

His brother's words stung as he heard them again now. His mother's too. A useless thing. Broken. Damaged. This feeling inside of him when he admired Eroan, it was so wrong, like a creature alive inside of him, eating him up, but gods, he wanted it. He was falling hard into madness and had no idea if he could stop it, or if he should. Tomorrow, he would be leaving for the coast, for the bronze brood, and he'd have to leave Eroan behind, in Elisandra's clutches. The thought made him want to tear his heart out to stop the hurt. If tomorrow was the end, then what was a kiss today? A risk.

His heart raced. Fear. What if Eroan was disgusted too?

But it was just a kiss.

Lysander lifted his hand.

A shadow sailed over them, instantly stealing the sunlight and blasting the courtyard in a frigid wind.

"Quickly!" Lysander grabbed Eroan's hand and pulled him through the doorway behind him.

A roar funneled down the corridor like a rushing torrent of noise. Lysander caught Eroan's glance and nodded. The queen had found them.

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CHAPTER 22



Eroan

“WE’RE GOING to play a game. Our last time, dear son, as you’ll be gone from my life tomorrow.” The queen laughed but quickly cut herself off by adding, “But not out of reach.”

Eroan swallowed, finding he couldn’t clear the knot in his throat. His back ached where it pressed down on the soft, quilted bed but that was likely to be the least of the hurt about to be rained down on him. His wrists were bound at either corner of the bed, and right now, a naked blond dragonkin was spending a great deal of time and focus removing Eroan’s belt. There were others here. Others from the queen’s harem, Eroan assumed. The same ones who had been present at the bathing pool. They lay sprawled at the edges of the bed, watching with heavy sexed-up eyes. And Lysander was as far away as he could get, standing with his back to a window. He hadn’t moved from there since the guards had shoved them both inside these chambers.

Eroan hadn’t looked to know if the prince was furious or if he’d surrendered himself to whatever was to happen next.

“He likes males, did you know, dear son?” the queen crooned.

Eroan closed his eyes. Then this was to be the induction into her harem. *I’m sorry*, he had told Janna when she had tried to kiss him. She had loved him. But he hadn’t loved her, not like she’d wanted.

“Answer me!”

Eroan twitched and opened his eyes to see the blond dragonkin raise an eyebrow.

“No,” Lysander said from across the room. Eroan dared not look.

“No what?”

“No, Mother, I did not know.”

Lysander’s words were clipped, running the razor’s edge of rage. Eroan swallowed again.

“I discovered the revelation while he was being cleansed,” she went on, sounding giddy with delight. “He’s broken. Like you.”

“Don’t do this,” Lysander whispered, so softly Eroan wondered if anyone else had heard.

“What was that, my broken mess of a son? Did you just try to deny me the pleasure of my pet?”

“Stop it, Elisandra,” Lysander growled.

“Oh, come now. What did you think was going to happen? Tomorrow you are gone. Let us enjoy a moment together, mother and son. Let us wallow in pleasure. I might even let you have your elf...” Eroan heard her voice trail off and still dared not look over. “What an interesting thought. You’ve never seen the bronze couple... It’s quite the sight. The main attraction—you—must perform with the entire brood watching. Do it well, and you’ll find yourself the center of a sexual madness brought about by your entertainment. It would be remiss of me to let you go into that without some practice.” She clapped her hands, and her harem melted off the bed. All but the sultry blond. He untied Eroan’s trouser laces and jerked them down, over Eroan’s hips.

There was little point in resisting. The queen already knew his weakness. And so the blond leaned forward. His mop of hair tickled Eroan’s lower belly. His tongue swirled, dipping below his waist, following the defined V downward. The blond lifted his gaze and locked his glare with Eroan’s. It shouldn’t feel this good, shouldn’t bring his body alive, but it did. Unbidden desire stirred low, slowly swelling Eroan’s member.

Another clap of her hands and the blond reared up, revealing his own proud, taut erection. Another pulse of desire thumped through Eroan. He bared his teeth, belying his body’s betrayal.

Lysander’s growl rumbled like distant thunder. “Stop this now, or I’ll kill the bronze bitch you’ve arranged for me and start a war you do not

want.”

Eroan turned his head to witness Lysander squaring up to his mother. They looked so alike, the same proud lines, the same shapely eyes. Different colored eyes though. Was that normal?

“You think I won’t do it?” the prince sneered. “Don’t think I don’t know how Dokul wants me. Years ago, he tried to take me by force. I almost choked him for it, and he’s never forgotten. If I kill his bronze bitch, it just gives him an excuse to have me in his bed and for him to war with you, so don’t try to tell me he’ll kill me first. He won’t. If you want me to fuck you an army of bronze-crossed amethyst, you’ll stop this right now!”

Elisandra grinned. Then her laughter sparkled when she couldn’t contain her delight any longer. “There’s my son. I knew you had some fight left in you.”

She might have said something else but the blond lowered his mouth around Eroan’s hardening erection and a sudden electric pleasure stole the thoughts from his head. All but one. He didn’t want this. He pulled on the ropes at his wrists and tried to twist his hips away. The dragonkin’s cold hands claimed his hips and held firm. “Stop,” Eroan snarled out.

“You want this to end?” Elisandra asked Lysander. “Or do you want something else, dear son?”

“Don’t, Mother.”

She clicked her fingers and the blond lifted his mouth off Eroan with a wet sucking pop, leaving Eroan panting, teeth bared.

“Do not threaten me, whelp,” the queen snapped, drawing Eroan’s gaze again. “You have just begun to understand the world in which we live, in which I must govern. You think you know savagery. You have no idea. This elf, he is a gift, from me to you. Take him and use that memory when you couple and maybe you’ll survive the bronze.” She gripped her son’s face and forced him to look at Eroan.

Heat flushed through him at the thought of Lysander’s mouth on him, chilling but at the same time tightening that ball of pleasure, making his member aching hard. He pulled again at the straps.

Lysander tore his head free of his mother’s grip and shoved her hand away. “I’m not fucking him for you.”

“Then I will.” She beamed. “Maybe he’ll survive me. You and I both know most elves don’t.”

CHAPTER 23



Lysander

LYSANDER TRIED to temper the thudding in his chest, the one that matched the hot beat straining his cock against his pants, but really, what was the point in hiding it? He wanted this. He'd started wanting it as soon as the blond had tied Eroan to the bed and stripped him naked, and wanted it a whole lot more when the male had taken Eroan's cock between his lips. There were two ways this could end. He could let his mother fuck Eroan and probably kill him when he didn't play along because, without Lysander, she had no reason to keep Eroan alive. The other option, the one that left him breathless, was for Lysander to give in to his wants, to give in to his mother, and even if Eroan didn't want this, Lysander knew how to make it pleasurable. A few whispers, the right touches. He'd had male lowers, made them want him, made them beg him to fuck them. Of course, it would be easier if Eroan wanted him too—although nothing about this whole fucked-up scenario likely aroused the elf.

He likes males...

Dare he believe her? And if he did, what did that mean? Here and now, it just meant there was a way out—to make it pleasurable.

Lysander looked at the vision of an elf sprawled on the bed. The lust in him screamed for this to happen. Before now, before the courtyard, he would have, but if he took Eroan here, like this, whatever tiny flicker of

hope he had that they might one day be something more would be crushed. Eroan might have forgiven the lashings, but he'd never forgive rape.

Have his mother fuck him, probably kill him, or try to at least make it pleasurable? Whatever way it was dressed up, it was still rape, and he would still be gone tomorrow, leaving Eroan in his mother's grasp.

Lysander closed his eyes and breathed out. "If I do this, he comes with me to the coast."

His mother's purrs made his skin crawl. "On one condition. He must choose to go with you."

For anyone else, of course, they would choose to get away from hell, but not this elf. All Eroan had wanted was to be right here, close to the queen so he could kill her. This elf might like males, but Lysander had seen enough of the assassin's stubborn streak to know he wouldn't throw his life's purpose away to follow Lysander into another dragon-infested pit.

Eroan would choose to stay with the queen no matter the cost.

The elf blinked at him now, breathless and alert. Waiting, like Lysander's mother waited.

One problem at a time.

Lysander approached the bed, stripped off the swords, letting the weapons clatter to the floor, and bared his teeth at the loitering blond, summoning a throaty growl to warn him off. His mother groaned in delight behind him, and that only made Lysander's constant anger knot into a tighter barbed ball in his gut. Fuck her. And him. The blond was a leech, and the bitch-queen could get her rocks off watching. At this point, he was beyond caring.

Eroan's elegant elven eyes tracked him, and a sorry sat unspoken on Lysander's lips. He swallowed it, along with all the regrets and knelt on the edge of the bed. Prowling forward, his glare fused with Eroan's. Whatever was going on in the elf's head, he kept it from his guarded face. Lysander wanted a reaction.

Lysander placed a hand at Eroan's right side and a knee on his left, and prowled higher, keeping himself raised above the elf's panting chest, not touching. Eroan's widened pupils and slightly parted lips did nothing to rein in Lysander's raging desire. He lowered his head, looking deeper into the elf's eyes, trapping him, and whispered two words: "I'm sorry."

Eroan turned his head away, and the hollow ache in Lysander's chest grew larger. So that was the way it would be. What had he expected, really?

That Eroan would let this happen? That he'd be okay with being shamed and disgraced, tied to his enemy's bed and fucked against his will.

Desire buzzed hotter, tighter, tangling all the wrongs with the few rights. Lysander pushed onto his knees and tore off his shirt. When he fell forward again and braced his arms on either side of Eroan's shoulders, the elf flicked his gaze back to Lysander's face and let it wander down.

Lysander felt that scorching look as though the elf had his chained hands on him, stroking him, and giving in to the sudden, urgent need to seal this moment in his memory, he brushed his mouth over Eroan's, nudging, teasing, testing. *'Please,'* Lysander's heart screamed, *'please want me.'* He might break apart if he was forced to do this against Eroan's will.

Eroan lifted his chin. The elf's eyes fluttered. Lysander stilled, heart pounding out a relentless beat. Eroan parted his lips, sighed out, lifted his head and darted his tongue across Lysander's lower lip. Lust clutched at Lysander's breaths, cutting them short.

"Don't be sorry," Eroan whispered.

Lysander breathed in those words and tumbled into a messy, plundering kiss. Eroan matched his fervor, so the kiss grew hotter, hungrier, like a fire alive between them. The elf arched beneath him, his heat like the warm, inviting glow of the sun on his wings. Lysander wanted to bask in it, to breathe in this elf and capture him forever inside. He cupped the elf's face and broke the kiss. Brightness filled Eroan's beautiful eyes. Brightness of need, of belonging, but of sadness too. He understood, this stubborn, stupid elf, he understood it all. And Lysander's heart stuttered. How could it be that now they shared this moment?

With a growl masking his wrought groan, Lysander crawled down, running his tongue over Eroan's right pec to where a tiny pebble-like nipple stood erect. He swirled his tongue there and heard Eroan's hiss. Lower, he kissed over the ripple of abs, rising and falling in a panting rhythm, and lower, into the dip at Eroan's waist where the tempting V lured Lysander's mouth.

Lysander flicked his gaze up the beautiful expanse of Eroan's body, and with a grin pulling at his lips, one that seemed to elicit an intensity to Eroan's face, he ran his tongue up Eroan's velvety smooth, hard erection.

Eroan arched again, this time throwing his head back, his hips tilting his arousal, his body seeking to fit itself into something tight. He uttered something smooth and foreign and Lysander happily answered by closing

his mouth over the silken steel, tasting salty sweetness. He curled his tongue around the head and flicked, delivering a shot of pleasure that sent a cascade of tremors through Eroan's body. He felt the elf pant, felt his body strumming, and tasted the salty pre-cum. But this was just the beginning. How Lysander ached to bring Eroan to the cusp of screaming his name, only to switch it up and make the sweet anticipation all that more consuming. He could love this male for hours, and to know he wanted this too—

A sword touched Lysander's neck. His sword. He knew its song. He froze, mouth still molded around Eroan's cock.

"There's a good boy... thank you for warming him up. Now, if you don't mind... this one is mine."

Eroan's panting changed from urgent need to those of short, sharp fear. Lysander lifted off and turned his head, scoring his mother with a magic-laden glare. She narrowed her eyes and asked, "Will you fight me on this, Lysander?"

"He's mine." Magic beat inside him like a second heart. Magic and rage and power, fear, and hurt and shame. All of it beat like a drum.

"Get off him now, dear, before he loses the lust. I want to milk it out of him."

Lysander grabbed for the sword's handle. His mother twisted, but not fast enough. She lunged, but he pushed off the bed and sealed his fingers around her throat before she could get a hold of him. Lust and rage pumped power through his veins. He'd kill her, fuck her, tear her to shreds—all at once. His fingers dug into her neck. Oh gods, nothing had felt so right as this.

Breathless, Elisandra's mouth gaped, her one remaining eye flared.

Lysander slammed her into the wall. Bricks and cement buckled. Her beautiful face turned blue, and the rage inside broke open, spilling new strength into his veins. He leaned in, squeezed tighter, and whispered. "Die for me, Mother."

Her struggles slowed. He plastered himself close, still flushed and wanting, but hungry for death, not sex. "For so long, I've been under you." Her lip twitched, and his magic swelled outward, the shift crawling into his bones. "I've suffered your love, succumbed to your whims. No more, Mother! No. Fucking. More."

He held the magic back, damming it while at the same time using it, funneling it. He was stronger, so much stronger than he'd realized, and in her eye, she saw it too. Fear crackled. Real fear. It pulled on her shift, dragging her true form out of the dark.

Her neck snapped with an audible grisly *snick*.

Still, he pushed, crushing her bones into dust. It wasn't enough. Lysander roared and let the magic go, let it all go. Power flooded into the room, into him. He embraced it, took it, used it, shaped it, until he was made of scales and claws, and fangs and wings, and the fire inside of him churned and danced and blazed. He slammed a foot down on his mother's human carcass, curled her limp body into his claws and crushed it inside his fist. The roar didn't sound like his. Maybe because he didn't feel like himself either. Power danced through him, lit by the fury inside and fanned by years of her abuse.

She was dead.

He'd killed her.

His rampant thoughts stuttered.

He'd killed the queen.

Wind rushed from the room as though sucked out. Lysander whipped his head around to view the windows, and there, outside, night had molded itself into the shape of an enormous beast. Akiem. Golden eyes glowed like the fire glowing behind obsidian chest scales, building, churning, rising up his brother's throat. Lysander spread his wings wide, shielding the elf on the bed. His broken wing twitched and bent at an odd angle, but it didn't matter. He lifted his head. He had to protect the elf.

Akiem's fireblast poured in through the windows. Liquid flame spilled over walls, devoured the floor, and slammed into Lysander's chest and wings, washing over his scales. Eyes closed, he dropped his head against the onslaught and bore the weight of heat. On and on it rolled, until he was sure nothing outside of a dragon could survive the blistering furnace. When the fire collapsed, pulled back like a wave receding, Lysander whirled.

The bed, the ropes, it was... ash.

He raked claws through the debris, turning over cinders. No!

It couldn't be. After everything they'd been through, Eroan had to live. Because if he hadn't lived, what was the point to all of this, what did it matter? The queen was dead...

But so was Eroan.

That fragile hope inside his chest shattered.

A growl rumbled up Lysander's throat, rattling his scales. He bowed his head and charged at the windows. The wall wouldn't stop him. He burst through bricks and stone and lunged, clamping his jaws around his startled brother's neck, sinking his teeth into scale and gristle. Akiem's thunderous roar shook the air. He clawed at Lysander's belly, at his wings, and they both tumbled. Pain, Lysander knew it all too well. They scrabbled, Akiem's wings beating, whipping up a storm, but Lysander had a hold of his brother by the neck and pulled, dragging him out of the air.

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CHAPTER 24



Eroan

EROAN PALMED both of Lysander's swords as he ran from the queen's chamber. The tower jolted, rocking sideways. Thunder ripped through the walls. Dust rained, and still, Eroan ran. When the fire poured in behind him, it licked up his back. He didn't stop.

Every footfall, every beat of his heart sang—*the queen is dead*.

He veered around a corner and plunged the twin swords into a dragonkin's chest, barely missing a step. On, he ran, and cut down more, letting the blades sing for him. In the confusion and noise, he plucked the dragonkin from their life-strings. One, two, three... Until he and the swords were soaked in blood.

Bursting out of the tower's base and into its courtyard, he looked up to see dragons filling the moonlit skies. Two of the beasts tumbled through the air, raking and clawing, teeth flashing. Down, they fell.

Lysander and Akiem.

Eroan watched them fall until smaller spires blocked the sight. Shudders trembled through the earth moments later.

He couldn't help him, not now.

The queen was dead. Freedom was moments away, waiting right outside the walls. All he had to do was pass through the gates while the beasts all gathered in the skies. He wouldn't be noticed.

A roar split the air. He couldn't tell which of them screamed their agony.

Protect him, Carline had said. How could he? This wasn't his world.

It was done.

Eroan turned his back on the tower and jogged toward the stone gateway. As their mangled bellows and screeches rolled into the night, he slipped silently into the dark.

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CHAPTER 25



Lysander

FLAGS FLUTTERED ALONG PALISADE WALLS. Like snake tongues, Lysander thought. The wall stretched for miles, rose and fell with the hills, severed forests and cleaved through valleys. Lysander knew because he'd been following it for days now. One foot in front of the other, that was all he had to do. One, two, three, four...

Hot sweats and cold shivers racked his body, but he had to keep moving. If he fell, he wouldn't get up. The outside hurt had numbed days ago, the wounds dealt to him by Akiem. But the inside... the inside ached so badly he wanted to fall to his knees and let it consume him. He knew that need. It was the same need that once had him soaring toward the ground with his wing held closed. That voice, that need, it whispered sweet promises of freedom, but it wanted death. And Lysander wasn't ready for that. Not yet. He'd walked too damn far to die now.

"Halt! You there!"

He blinked into the misty rain and up at the watchtower.

"State your business in bronze lands."

My business... Lysander swallowed. *To live*, he thought. His legs buckled beneath him. His hands sank into the cold mud. It writhed through his fingers like Akiem's insides had. He hadn't killed his brother, though. Hadn't been able to...

A gate rumbled open and a stream of bronze soldiers filed out, all in their tarnished armor. The smell of metal and blood swirled around Lysander.

“Your name, visitor?” one barked.

Fog lapped around them, making them seem surreal. *Maybe I am dead*, he thought. *Akiem has killed me after all*. “Lysander Amethyst,” he croaked, voice as broken as his body. “The queen is dead.”



THE NEXT HOURS or days were a blur of hot and cold, of faded golds and the sound of clanging metal. None of it made any sense, but when he closed his eyes, he saw his hands around Elisandra’s throat, felt her bones shatter beneath his fingers, and that didn’t make any sense either. The only sound that made any sense was a voice he didn’t know but liked to hear. Female. She spoke softly, murmuring in his ear and her touch fluttered lightly over his broken heart. Soon, her voice was joined by the rumblings from a deeper male, one he knew. Dokul. The bronze leader. They spoke of things he didn’t want to hear. Of death and chaos. But like an approaching storm taints the air, the truth would soon be on him, and he couldn’t hide from it forever.

“You killed the queen.”

Lysander blinked into the mug of steaming soup and rolled a few possible answers around his head, tasting the sound of them first. He was somewhere deep inside the bronze stronghold, in a warren of underground tunnels. It had been days since he’d collapsed at their gates. They’d cared for him, fed him, dressed him in simple clothes. This room was warm and close with heavy, moisture-rich air. A table and a couple of chairs. No windows. They didn’t have windows here. It all seemed mostly civilized. But then they would, until they got what they wanted out of him. Whatever that might be.

“Amethyst are demanding your return.”

The female who spoke was all caramel skin and golden eyes. Lysander’s thoughts stalled at the sight of her smooth, hairless head. Even her lips held a warm, bronze sheen like she’d been poured into a mold and hardened into

the creature sat at the end of the table. Her rich, tantalizing voice had been the one he'd heard as he'd recovered.

"Who?" he asked. It might even have been the first thing he'd said to her.

"Akiem."

When he'd fled, the skies full of teeth and claw, his brother had lain still and lifeless at the foot of the tower. They had fought before, many times, but never like that. His kin had stalked him for days after, maybe longer.

And now the dragons had a new ruler. "King Akiem." The name tasted bitter on his tongue. Something inside his shoulder sparked. He rolled it, working out the pain.

"Not our king, and not yours, I think."

Lysander sent her a sideways look.

The golden beauty answered with a smile. "The queen is dead. The tower and her lands are in chaos. We're readying our forces to attack."

The bronze were going to war on two fronts? "What of the frontlines?"

"We can manage. The humans build their machines and we tear them down. It's been like that for centuries. They have nothing new to assault us with. The lines are holding. Their numbers are failing. We haven't seen them in months. It won't be long now before they stop coming altogether."

The bronze were savage and had the numbers, but his brother's intelligence was a vicious thing. Akiem knew how to strategize. A war would be costly. Lysander personally knew every member of the flights who would throw themselves into battle. Many he'd trained and fought alongside. They were honorable, brave. And to think his actions might bring about their deaths. He hadn't wanted that. He'd just wanted the pain to end.

"You came to us... Why?" she asked.

"Perhaps I was fulfilling my mother's deal?" His mouth danced around a smile that never quite appeared.

"Or perhaps you were sent by Akiem to infiltrate our ranks prior to an attack?" The bronze's soft lips lifted at one corner, inviting him to admit the truth.

She was a slippery one, not as blunt as Dokul, with keen, intelligent eyes that had already read him several times. Lysander laughed and lifted his mug to his lips, tasting the rich, syrupy soup. It went down like sweet caramel. "He'd be a fool to attack you."

She leaned forward, jangling the strange metal jewelry around her neck, and spoke softly, "If we assume you came here to seek sanctuary, then I think you've underestimated your brother's pride. The jeweled ones want you back as a matter of justice and honor. Every moment you're free undermines his new rule."

"You have the wrong brother. I can't undermine anything of his."

The bronze's smile grew. She stood and perched herself on the edge of the table beside him. Draped in bronze lamé armor that contoured to her body, she looked as though she'd been dipped in gold.

Lysander allowed his gaze to roam over her powerful physique. She was no lithe, jeweled dragon, and could likely match him in strength as a man. As dragon, he had yet to see, but few bronze dragons were small. Gold glittered on her lashes. Whoever this bronze was, she was important. Dokul's daughter, perhaps? He'd never seen her, but he'd heard much of the warrior-female that mounted betrayers' heads on the stakes lining the palisade walls. Oddly enough, few bronze betrayed their own kin.

Did she count the queen's death as a betrayal?

"Should we start a war over you, prince, or is that exactly what Akiem wants?"

"Let's not fool ourselves." He leaned back in the chair, making the gesture seem casual, but had moved out of her reach. "You've wanted war with the amethyst since my mother killed your queen. My being here gives you a convenient excuse—"

"Why did you kill Elisandra?" Delight flashed in her eyes and pulled her lips into an unsettling grin.

Lysander stroked the mug to keep from seeing the bloodlust warming her face. It only reminded him of how this brood operated from the ground up on violence. But he had walked here and surrendered himself to them. He'd known what awaited him. But why had he killed her? It wasn't because she'd threatened him. She'd twisted him around her fingers for years. Neither was it because she'd tortured Eroan, though that had played a large part in it. It wasn't any one thing but a mountain of them, pushed down on him for so long, it finally broke him open.

"I killed her..." he swallowed and ground his teeth, forcing the words up and over his tongue. "...because it was that or fuck her, and you probably know I prefer males." The bronze didn't care who fucked who, just that they did, graphically and in public, for them all to enjoy. He didn't

think for a second he'd escaped that fate, but at least he'd earned their reverence. It would save him, buy him enough time to figure his way around this mess. For a little while.

The bronze breathed in, expanding her chest and flaring her nostrils. She dropped off the table and bent over, filling his vision with her glittery eyes. "We'll see, Lysander Amethyst." She spoke so closely, his name touched his lips, tasting sweet and metallic. "My name is Mirann, and you owe me a coupling." She padded away, barefooted, anklets chiming. "I'm the last line of defense between you and my father." She paused at the door and threw a look over her shoulder. "Get strong, prince. War is coming, and you're to be its beating, bloody heart."

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CHAPTER 26



The bronze warren stretched along the coastal cliffs, to the end of the world as far as Lysander could tell. Tunnels interconnected, linking living domes with the areas allocated to workers. There were no towers here and no far-reaching views. Just long windowless corridors, torchlight, ventilation fans and the throaty sounds of the central forge bellows. Lysander had often wondered why the bronze wore chainmail mail and little else. Now he knew, the heat made him want to peel his skin off and pant out the excess as dragon.

He dressed in the supple chamois-style leather pants and vest that had been left out for him and found the firestarter buried beneath the clothes. He turned it over in his hand. He couldn't recall bringing it, just the memory in which Eroan had tossed it at his feet and asked him to light a fire—as though it were part playful insult, part wry joke.

Eroan had started a fire all right. One that hadn't burned nearly long enough.

And now the elf was dead.

He closed his fingers around it.

His mother was dead. Akiem was the dragon king. And what was Lysander's place now? All dragons outside the bronze would kill him.

He shouldn't have done it. But he hadn't been thinking about the after. He wasn't sure he'd thought at all, just acted, just closed his hands around her throat and squeezed. He hadn't known he was capable. He *shouldn't* have been capable. The strength that had surged through his veins... it hadn't felt like his at all. And the shift, when it had come over him... It had never been as raw as that before, as visceral.

He shuddered and set the firestarter on a shelf. He wasn't ready to throw it away. If his mother's words of savagery were correct, he might need a few good memories to cling to.



MIRANN WALKED him through the winding corridors, saying little with her words, but her looks were expressive. She ignored any lowers passing by and acknowledged any bronze worth her time with a curt nod. Lysander watched it all and soaked in the smell of hot metal, warm rock, and fire. In human form, all the bronze had a solid roughness he wasn't used to seeing. Jeweled dragons were slimmer, more agile, quicker, like snakes in the grass, but what the bronze lacked in speed, they made up for in muscle, and much of it was on display behind their minimal mail attire and chinking adornments. Anklets jangled. Earrings, nose-rings, arm cuffs glinted like treasures, advertising their wearers' assets, drawing Lysander's wandering eye.

Some of the bronze males looked as though they could crush him with a glance. Most ignored him, though he caught a few curious glances his way. They were made for soldiering, which was exactly what this warren had been created for. Battlements peaked out from the cliff face, drawing in salt water that was likely the reason for the bronze's constant tarnished appearance. Extended perches beat with the constant sound of dragon wings coming and going from patrols.

"Where are we going?"

"My father wishes to see you, now you're recovered."

It had been inevitable. He'd been among them for a few days with Mirann as his guide but so far had avoided Dokul.

"Don't worry." Mirann turned her head. "You're still mine."

Lysander made a mental note to better guard his expression. His mother's deal with the bronze likely still stood, but with Akiem king, and none of his brood old enough to fight to rule, that made Lysander a viable candidate should Akiem lose his grip on the tower. Dokul wasn't about to throw away an opportunity like that one. Lysander hoped. But the bronze chief had been known to throw reason aside to get what he wanted, like stealing the queen's elf because he could.

Mirann heaved open a set of enormous dragon-sized doors, freeing a blast of sweltering air. It rolled over Lysander, almost dropping him to his knees. Sweat plastered his shirt to his back and dripped down his neck. Molten iron churned at the center of a huge natural cavern. Great fans sucked in air, feeding an enormous forge, currently managed by a dozen lower bronze. Metal clanged and rang. Molten iron bubbled.

The dragon in him stirred, wanting to stretch out and bask in the heat. He breathed in, wondered if there was any air left in this place, and saw Dokul by one of many smelting molds.

“New barriers,” the chief grumbled without lifting his head. “The armored boats can’t breach our defenses, but it pays to be prepared.” He finally looked up and regarded Lysander with a flat, unimpressed frown. “She should have known she had a viper in her brood. I saw it coming...” Dokul’s gaze slid downward, assessing like a dragon does his next meal.

Lysander straightened his shoulders and shrugged off the sense of unease.

“I tried to get you out from under her before events turned, but she was determined to have one of her whelps in my brood, spreading her jeweled seeds.” Dokul’s hard mouth formed something of a smile, but before it settled on his lips, it twisted, turning into a leer. “And here you are, Lysander Amethyst. All ours.” Dokul stroked at his chin and nodded. “Healed quickly, I see. I hope you left him in a worse state.”

Lysander dipped his chin, politely acknowledging the words. Unsure as to what he was supposed to say, he figured no dragon could shrug off praise. “You have an impressive operation here.”

“We are the machine protecting the dragonlands, its beating heart of defense!” Dokul boomed too loudly, the sound of it rang over that of clanging metal. “A fact your mother took for granted.” Dokul dropped a hand on Lysander’s shoulder and turned him so he had no choice but to walk alongside the bronze chief. In the heat, sweat glistened on the dragon’s brow and bare chest, absorbing the firelight, making him seem to glow from within. “Akiem wanted to divide us. Were you aware?”

“No.” Lysander didn’t strategize, that was his brother’s role.

“He believed we’d become too strong a force and were a threat to Elisandra’s rule.”

Hammers clanged over and over, thudding like Lysander’s racing heart. The heat was crawling beneath his skin, trying to unwrap him and spill the

dragon out. He wondered how all these bronze could stand working in it without freeing their true selves. If he didn't escape soon, he'd struggle to keep himself controlled.

Dokul's fingers sunk deeper into Lysander's shoulder, verging on pain. He stopped and peered into Lysander's eyes. The bronze's golden eyes took the firelight and honed into something ancient and sharp, and that gaze burned into Lysander, traveling deep, scorching his soul.

"Elisandra's rule was weak," the chief sneered. "With you, we're going to take our destiny back from the jeweled pretenders, back where it belongs, in bronze claws."

"How?"

"Your brother showed us his wants too soon. You are his weakness. He'll do almost anything to get you back so he can demonstrate to his restless brood how he has the right to rule."

Lysander couldn't imagine Akiem would be so foolish as to bargain for his return. His brother should be glad to be rid of him. There had to be more at play here. "Few in Amethyst will challenge him. My worth isn't so great as for him to make mistakes."

Dokul chuckled luscious rolling laughter and patted his hot hand against Lysander's cheek. "Her greatest achievement was making you believe you are worthless. Soon, you'll come to realize your worth. I'll help you with that..." Dokul chuckled as he walked away. He waved a hand and Mirann appeared by Lysander's side.

"Join me, later, Lysander *Amethyst*," Dokul rumbled. "We have much to discuss."

Mirann's eyes narrowed at her father's back. She cut that look toward Lysander. "You may wander freely but do not attempt to leave, you will be stopped. With force if necessary."

"I'm your prisoner then?"

"Oh," she purred, her smile slithering back into place. "Very much so."

CHAPTER 27



Whatever wine Lysander had in his cup, it was hot and spicy, and he was going to need more of it to get through this.

Mirann, her father, and half a dozen of his brood, discussed a breach in one of their defenses, what to do with a bronze who'd committed some heinous crime—the details of which Lysander didn't want to imagine—while Lysander listened, ate, and consumed enough wine to blur the hard edges of this suffocating place. He hadn't seen the sky in days, and while it normally wouldn't have bothered him, coupled with the heat and oppressive atmosphere of so many bronze all packed into their underground warren, he found himself wanting to crawl out of his skin and stretch somewhere outside. Only now did he begin to appreciate how Eroan must have felt shut away from the light.

A few bronze asked about the tower, about the queen, Akiem, his brood. He answered, keeping his replies vague and light. No doubt there were social hierarchies here he had yet to understand. He also watched them closely between wine refills. They touched often. A brush here, a hand there. Amethyst had been the same, but not for him, not for a long time, since they'd learned of his *failures*.

One of the lowers serving at the feast sparked a memory in his mind, but it wasn't until she refilled his drink for the fifth or sixth time that he recognized her. The lower from the amethyst feast. The one he'd tried and failed to fuck as a test.

He took his fresh drink with a tight smile in her direction, but something in his eyes must have tipped her off because instead of continuing to keep

her distance, she leaned down, squeezed his thigh, and whispered, “I’m ready to try again when you are.”

Mirann tore the lower away from Lysander’s side and in a grappling rush that was over in a blink, she dropped the lower to the floor, then stepped over the motionless lower, returned to her father’s side at the table, and fell right back into her conversation. It had happened so fast, Lysander could only sit in stunned silence. None of the others seemed to have noticed and certainly didn’t care. He looked down at the fallen lower. She wasn’t moving. He stared at her chest, waiting for the rise and fall that would tell him she was at least still alive.

He spent the rest of the meal acutely aware of the cooling body and found he’d lost his appetite.



“YOU’RE MINE NOW. She disrespected me by touching you without my permission, especially before the coupling.”

So, *that* was still happening. Wonderful.

Lysander dropped onto the end of the bed and fixed Mirann in his swimming vision. She glowed in the doorway, a vision of metal and tawny skin. She’d killed the lower without blinking. It was a lesson he wouldn’t soon forget. But as prime a bronze as she was, he would not be able to couple with her.

She strode toward him, planting herself between his knees, and tilted his head up. “I know this is hard for you.”

Her hot fingers sizzled against his chin. This whole fucking place sizzled. He wanted to go home, to go back to where the skies were big and the forests sweeping.

“Not hard where I need it though.”

She shoved him. Lysander threw a hand back, bracing himself upright, for all the good it did him. Her mouth met his. Her tongue pushed in. He considered blocking her but knew if he resisted, she’d still take him. So he kissed her back, trying to push some feeling into it and failing miserably.

Mirann straightened and stroked his cheek. “It’s a shame, truly, but it won’t save you.”

He licked his lips, rolling them together. She tasted like metal. “It’s not you.”

“Oh, I know that.” She laughed, drifted to the door, and kicked it closed. “But we’re going to have to figure out a way to make this happen. Otherwise, our brood will use you up and throw you away.” Reaching behind her back, she unclipped the lamé gown and let it slip into a puddle at her feet. Stepping out, she approached Lysander again, bracelets glinting. She wore a tiny diamond piercing in her right nipple. A green circle looped through her belly button, and she had another glittery gem between her legs, clearly visible beneath a neatly trimmed V of golden hair. As far as he could tell, it was the only patch of hair on her.

He should feel something, a stirring, a lick of desire, anything. “I, er... it’s the drink.”

“Oh, please. Don’t insult me by lying.” She pressed herself close and settled her hands on his shoulders. “We know all about your desires.”

Lysander looked up. She gathered his hands and planted them on her thighs. “It’s not the drink, it’s up here.” She flicked him on the forehead hard enough to sting. “And it’s not wrong. You think we care how you prefer males? That’s an amethyst hang-up, not ours. You can fuck all the males you like. I’ll pick some out for you if you like. But we do care that you can’t fuck females. That is a problem. One we need to fix.”

“Fix?”

“We have some herbs that help. You’ll be so high you won’t care what you’re fucking, but I’d rather avoid that. Dokul likes the couplings to be... pure.”

High he could do if it meant he got it over with. Although, he was skeptical it’d make any difference.

“I can teach you.” She reached down and cupped his balls. “This—” her fingers found his limp cock “—is just a blood vessel. Stimulated, you get hard. Males get you off. So think of a lover sucking your cock...” She stroked, applying just enough pressure to ignite something low in his belly. “There we go...”

Lysander opened his legs a little more, letting her hand ease lower. He closed his eyes, blocking her out so he could think around her. There were a string of lovers he could recall, and before Eroan, it had been about the blonds, but now... Now he pulled the image of Eroan spread on the queen’s bed. The way his body quivered, not with fear, but with lust. *Don’t be sorry.*

Mirann's mouth found his again, and this time Lysander took it, *hungered* for it. Her grip eased, a tug pulled at his belt, then his cock was free for her fingers to close around the head. She squeezed, delivering a glorious tightness that had his balls pulling tight and pleasure licking up his back. The things he could have done with that elf if his mother hadn't stopped him.

"Your problem is keeping it hard."

He fluttered his eyes open, not needing to look to know his cock was no longer playing this game.

She pinched. Pain shot through his dick. "Ah, fuck." Her hands slammed into his shoulders and he fell back, pinned beneath her. He let her crawl up him, his head a drunken mess.

"You have to get out of your head. It's screwing you up."

"It's not something I can just change my mind over or I would have! You don't know what she did—"

She grabbed his cock and balls and squeezed them together in her fist then crashed her mouth over his.

Blinding pain rocketed through him. He couldn't move, couldn't fight her off, and instead stayed frozen and pinned, his heart thumping in his ears.

She broke off, gasping. "You don't need to worry about the queen anymore. You need to worry about me. Only me. Because if you can't perform, I'll be the one who'll tear your throat out. Right after I tear this from between your legs." She yanked.

His teeth chattered as he bared them at her. "Get off me."

She finally let go—allowing Lysander to breathe again—and sat back on his thighs. "You're ours now. I will try to help you, but I can only do so much. I promise you one thing though. You only have to come during the coupling. After that, you can have any male here. None will pass up the chance to fuck Prince Lysander. But not before, you understand? And that includes my father. My claim on you is too important. I will not have it undermined."

His balls throbbed so damn hard he could taste them in his throat. "Fine," he hissed. "Get me those herbs, get me high, because there isn't any other way I'm doing this."

Mirann climbed off. "I'll bring you some."

Lysander cupped his bruised parts then wished he hadn't as they throbbed harder.

“I’m not your enemy.”

Mail jangled.

He closed his eyes. “Do you tell that to all the males before you geld them?”

He heard her chuckling laughter long after she’d left.

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CHAPTER 28



Eroan

EROAN HAD NEVER IMAGINED he'd return. None of the Order thought it. When they left the forest with blades clipped to their belts, wrists, and thighs, a righteous fire in their hearts, they left behind their lives and their futures.

He drifted down the winding village track, feeling detached and changed inside, as though he were a ghost and none of this was real. Children playing outside their village huts saw him first and stared, wide-eyed, at his blood-painted chest and face, at his torn trousers, at the stained blades crossed against his back. When they didn't move to greet him, Eroan was sure he had died and this was a dream, one that would guide him to Alumn's blessed garden.

He walked on, closer to the heart of the village. His people began to emerge from inside their homes. Emotion tried to choke him, trip him, rob him of all strength, so he fell, but he kept his eyes ahead, kept his thoughts in line. It wasn't over, not yet. A few more steps.

The village fountain bubbled ahead—a natural spring bubbling over granite rocks into a pool. Sunlight sparked across the water, making it appear as though diamonds trickled over the rocks. He knelt and plunged his hands into the basin. Blood flaked off and dissolved, clouding the cool water pink.

Cupping his hands, he splashed his face, gasping at the sudden cold. His heart, so strong a thing until now, fluttered, suddenly fragile and light like it might shatter. Dozens of gazes rode his back. It might even be all the village. They were silent, so all he heard was his own heart thudding. He knew their thoughts: Order assassins never returned.

He rose slowly and lifted his head. Hundreds stared back at him, eyes full of hope, wonder, and fear. Young and old. The Order was here, smudges of dark on the fringes of the crowd, glittering with weapons. Every single one watched and waited for the truth.

He swallowed, unsure if he could find his voice. The crowd shuffled apart, revealing Elder Xena in her fine white robes. Behind her, a female hunter with a bow at her back. Her eyes wide and shining with unshed tears. Janna. He felt himself break. She *knew* him beneath all the blood and wreckage. So this was real, it wasn't some dream he'd buried himself in.

His chest tightened, and his flighty heart threatened to break free.

"You return to us, Eroan Ilanea?" Elder Xena spoke loud and true, lifting her voice so it carried over the sound of the fountain. The voice of reason, the voice of law. But even her gray eyes shone with fragile hope.

He nodded once and swallowed the great swell of emotion, so that when he spoke, it was clear and unbroken. "It is done."

Xena blinked and drew in a sudden breath. Relief flashed across her face. Relief and pride. She turned. "It is done!"

Cries went up, hands reached for him, closed around him, kisses, touches, so much adoration he thought he might drown in it. None cared that he was soaked in the blood. His brothers and sisters from the Order silently bowed their heads, and later, he would be among them, but for now, he let his people weep their joy. Eroan closed his eyes and lifted his head to the sunlight.

The Dragon Queen was dead.



A CELEBRATION HAD SPRUNG and spilled out into the village paths. Drums beat, the elves sang and danced, and Eroan knew he should be among them but wasn't sure his legs would hold him a second more. So he watched

them sing, listened to their sweet, feathered voices, and let the sound of it lull his frayed thoughts.

“Go.” Xena’s silvery eyes sparkled. Beside him, she bowed her head and whispered, “There will be time to celebrate again. They’ll not notice your absence.”

He tipped his head and forced his weary body from where he’d wedged himself against a wall. He could barely remember what hut was his—it had probably been given away—and stumbled toward one when a warm, soft hand slipped in his and firmly guided him on. Janna offered a smile, but he couldn’t return it. A numbness had infected him since the fountain. Exhaustion, probably. Shock, too. He knew the symptoms but couldn’t seem to organize his thoughts enough to pull himself out of it. He should be happy, should be celebrating with them.

Janna guided him through a low door into her hut. He took a step into the warmth, then another, but on the third, he went to his knees. The wall he’d built around himself had broken open, and now the flood of anguish was coming. He couldn’t stop it, could only let it happen, and he buried his face in his hands. The pain of being trapped in the dark, drenched in fear, buried under his own self-loathing and disgust. He remembered the dragons on him, flashes of madness, the queen’s claws, his bones withering to nothing without the light. What they had done... it was inside him, rotting him like a cancer. He reeked of dragon, of blood and death, of that tower and its dungeons, of the queen and her vicious intent.

“Shh...” Janna gathered him close. He buried himself against her chest. Silent tears soaked them both. He wanted to tell her why, tell her everything, but all the words choked him. Most of all, he wanted to tell her how he had returned but feared he shouldn’t have. He wasn’t like them now, wasn’t as they remembered him. Eroan Ilanea, assassin of the Order. He didn’t know who he was. Something inside had been lost or left behind in that tower, and now he was hardly here at all.

“Eroan,” Janna whispered. Her hand stroked over his hair. “It’s all right.”

No, it wasn’t. It never would be again. He couldn’t tell her, though he wanted to. He ached to have the words out of him so they no longer festered. But it was too soon and too much, and all he wanted right now was to be held, so he knew he wasn’t alone in the dark anymore.

“I’m sorry...” Her voice caught.

He heard another say he was sorry—Lysander—the only ray of light in that forsaken place. And he had left him there.

Eroan pushed out of Janna's arms and stumbled to his feet, fighting off her reaching hands.

"Eroan." She stood too, and came closer.

"Don't." He needed to think his way out of the dark, to take his thoughts from that terrible place and turn them toward some good. "It's fine. I just..." He fumbled with the swords. When the latch opened, he shrugged the sheaths off and gently rested the stained blades against the hut wall. *Lysander's* blades. Stained with the blood of the dozen dragonkin Eroan had cut down as he'd ran. The blood had dried, turning near-black, but some of the sharp edges shone through.

His thoughts stuttered.

"Where do they bury their dead?" he asked.

"What?" Janna crept closer, her steps careful and light.

"Their dead..." He looked up and blinked, clearing his swimming vision. Janna's long, green-hued white hair framed an innocent face, one he had seen in his mind and clung to in the longest moments of darkness. But here, now, she was too bright a thing, too innocent a thing. She looked at him with wide, doe-like eyes. His skin itched, dried blood cracking. The scars on his back tightened, then those on his chest. He rubbed over his heart. Then, to his horror, he remembered the collar. It was still there.

He dug his fingers into the thick leather. They had seen... everything. The scars, the blood, the collar. Shame roiled through him, turning over his stomach. It was all he could do not to run from her gaze, from his people. He stepped back. The room twisted out from under him.

"A knife." He tugged on the collar, briefly choking off his own air and the memories rushed in. The bronze bastard's hands around his throat, his other hand on his arousal. The queen jerking him like a pet on a leash. "Janna, a knife!"

He reached for the wall and managed to prop himself upright. His stomach heaved, body trying to reject the memory. Janna plucked a hunting knife from her belt and approached with fear in her eyes, and that only made all this worse.

He reached out a hand, fingers shaking too much. "Cut it off me."

She didn't move, and his gut heaved again. "Janna, I'm not going to hurt you. Cut it off, please..." *Please, get it off, then cut out this wrongness*

inside of me. He rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes. His heartbeat thudded too loud in his ears, and the darkness was flooding in, trying to swallow him. “Hurry.”

The blade touched his throat, pushed down, and sliced through the leather with a gasp.

Free.

Janna’s warm hand cupped his face. He opened his eyes and wondered how she could even stand to be so close to him. Then she was on her toes, her arms flung around him. “It’s all right now. You’re home.”

He pulled her close, buried his face in her hair and breathed in the pine and cut timber smell of home. It hurt, it hurt so much that without her holding him up, he would have fallen and not stopped falling. He dug his fingers in, afraid to lose her, afraid she might turn to smoke, revealing this was all a dream, and he was still deep inside the bowels of the tower, still chained in the dark, waiting for death.

It wasn’t over. Not for him. The shudders passed.

“I know how to kill them all,” he whispered.

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CHAPTER 29



The Order—what little remained of them seated around the table—regarded Eroan with wide-eyed awe that set his teeth on edge. They hadn't yet bombarded him with questions, but the barrage would come, better to deal with it now and get it over with.

He dumped Lysander's blades on the table and shoved, sending them skidding down the timber, so all twenty-two of the remaining assassins could get a good look at the vicious recurved design. He hadn't cleaned them. The blades were ripe with stale blood and dragon. All of the Order would need to become familiar with the smell for what he had planned. "At first, I thought these swords were forged steel, but take a closer look." They did, reaching out to touch and then recoiling at their tacky stickiness. "They're teeth, highly polished and shaped into that style." Murmurs drifted between them, questions bubbling. "And they're the only thing that can pierce dragonscale."

"You've seen it?" Hussan asked. "You've seen these blades pierce their scales?"

Eroan fixed the young assassin under his glare. He seemed younger than he remembered, but now he supposed they all looked young and too eager to die. "Yes."

The warriors picked up the blades and passed them around. "Why do they have these at all?" Seraph asked, the earring in the tip of her ear twitching as she arched her eyebrow. Before leaving for the tower, Eroan had told her to remove that gem from her ear, and there it was, still there. She likely believed he'd never return to know she'd disobeyed.

“When they shift into human,” he explained. “They move freely about their domains. The one who had these...” He licked his lips, hoping they hadn’t noticed the way his voice hitched. “He carried them with him at all times and used them effectively, either as swords or throwing weapons.”

Memories clawed at him. It was too soon, just a day had passed since he’d returned. He straightened and moved about the table, hoping to temper the flutter of panic tightening his chest. Just so long as he could keep himself together in public. The only alternative was to sit and rot in Janna’s hut. This was too important to wait.

“You killed him then,” Seraph said. She handed the blade off to Kaja beside her. “Else he wouldn’t be without them now.” Her smile was an innocent thing, but it still sliced deep into Eroan’s heart. “It must have been glorious,” she went on. “I wish I’d been there to see it.”

The others all grinned and murmured their agreements.

Eroan closed his hands into fists. “My pride was slaughtered. Lyel, Reese, Kine, Brend.” The names of the dead rang like bells. All assassins. All who had been seated at this table, just like they were now. “Slain before we reached the tower walls.” His tone shut them down. “There is no glory in death, Seraph. When it comes, there’s no epiphany, no sudden realization or justice. It’s brutal, it’s drawn-out, you might die clutching your insides, trying to shove them back where they belong, or you might feel the pull of a blade across your throat and taste your lifeblood spilling over your tongue. Death is not a celebration of life. It’s cruel and uncompromising and a bitter waste.”

Seraph bowed her head, the tips of her ears turning pink. “I didn’t mean to speak so lightly of it.”

“Clearly, you did.”

“I’m sorry, sassa,” she mumbled, adding a term of respect.

“Don’t be sorry, be smarter.” He folded his arms and straightened to regard the rest of the Order. Only Curan and Nye were older than him, and they watched silently, warily, likely remembering how their hero had returned to them painted in blood.

Eroan rubbed at his neck. “There’s a dragon graveyard two days’ hike from here, near the borders. I want four prides to go there, dig up their teeth and bring them back.”

“We’re making new weapons?” Hussan asked.

“Yes. But not just for us. There aren’t enough of the Order left to stop them.”

“Then who?”

Curan narrowed his eyes. The older assassin had likely been in charge before Eroan’s return. Eroan returned his gaze now. “I’ll tell you when you return.”

The group filed out. “Seraph,” Eroan stopped her before she could slip through the door.

She turned and seemed to straighten as though lifting her shoulders could make her seem bigger. She wasn’t the strongest here, nor was she the brightest, but she was fast and lethal. Traits he’d honed into her before his leaving.

“Take the earring out.”

She blinked rapidly and reached up to touch the gem. “Sassa, I—”

“I don’t want excuses. Do it, or I’ll tear it out myself when you least expect it. Do I need to explain again why it’s inappropriate? We must always be ready.”

“Of course, sassa.” She unclipped the earring, tucked it into her pocket, and hurried after the others, leaving Nye and Curan behind, seated at the far end of the table. Thankfully, they didn’t wear the awe-struck gazes of the young ones. Curan and Nye knew him too well to place him high on a pedestal. Shame tried to heat Eroan’s face. He turned his thoughts to the blades instead and caught Nye looking them over too.

Nye’s black mop of hair and dramatic sloping eyes contrasted with most of the elves in the village. He had never cared to dance around his words and wouldn’t now. Eroan didn’t have to wait long for him to make his thoughts known. “The last time we partnered with humans, they betrayed us and left us on the wrong side of their ocean.” And there it was, Eroan’s plan right out in the open.

“But they also suffered enormous losses, rendering them almost extinct.”

Curan glanced between them both. Bigger, broader, the scar running down the right side of his face regularly frightened the children. In truth, the scar was the hardest thing about the male. Inside that guarded exterior was a heart that cared too much. “Shouldn’t you take some time?”

“What for?”

Curan raised an eyebrow as though asking if it was really necessary for him to spell it out. “To recover... from your *ordeal*.”

Eroan folded his arms crossed. “Xena has given me the all-clear. Are you going to argue with her?” Luckily, Xena hadn’t seen him come undone in Janna’s arms last night or the elder would have ordered him to rest up. He’d lose his mind *resting*. He needed to be *doing*.

Curan sniffed. “You could tell her the sky is purple and she’d agree with you.” The assassin rose and bridged his fingers on the table-top, eyeing Eroan in the same way he imagined he’d appeared to Seraph. The older elf had never challenged Eroan’s authority, until now. Eroan wouldn’t have much of an argument either. The others had missed all the signs, too wrapped up in the mystique of his return, but neither Curan or Nye were so easily fooled. Eroan’s fingers still trembled when his gaze wandered. He looked at them behind crossed arms now, but they saw. They couldn’t miss the raw grazes on his neck either.

Curan pushed upright. “Your sacrifices haven’t been ignored, brother. Nobody is going to blame you if you take some time to recover.”

“Time?” he laughed. “Amethyst are in chaos. The dragons are in turmoil. This is our opportunity. We won’t get another like it in decades, if ever. We need to move on this now.”

Curan stilled, considered it, and nodded. “Do what you must, but make sure your judgment is clear.” He left, leaving only Nye behind like a shadow simmering in the corner.

“No sage words from you?” Eroan asked.

Nye stood, scraping his chair back and squared up to Eroan. The elf’s gaze flicked to Eroan’s grazed neck—the pattern of the collar clearly visible—and back up to his face. Eroan waited for the scorning words, words that would strip his flimsy barriers and reveal the raw wounds behind, but Nye said nothing, and left moments later, which somehow felt worse than if he’d said what they were all thinking... that Eroan was walking the fine edge of reason and gambling with the lives of too few Order elves.

He collected Lysander’s blades and hesitated. The twin blades weighed less than a single elven one. Their design was art and function. Had Lysander made them himself, fashioned them from amethyst teeth? No other dragon had possessed anything like them. There was surely a story behind them, one Eroan would probably never know. And now they might

be the key to unlocking the solution that would see the dragons fall back into the earth from where they came.

He ran a hand down the sweep of one, brushing his fingers over their filthy roughness. He should clean them, free them, make them his, and he knew exactly where to do that.

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CHAPTER 30



Eroan waded toward deeper water where the surface churned and the noise from the Whitelady waterfall drowned out the thoughts in his head. Soaked through, he shrugged off one sword and plunged it beneath the surface. After a few brisk strokes, it came up clean and smooth again. He plunged the second sword in and scrubbed it clean.

If only it were that easy to clean their taint off me.

He'd washed last night in the near darkness, not long after weeping in Janna's arms, but he still felt the sting of the dragons' invasive touches on his arms, his wrists, and around his neck. It hadn't mattered in the prison, or even in the queen's bed. He hadn't expected to survive, to come back, to live with this knotted wrongness inside of him.

Movement near the water's edge caught his eye. He lifted his gaze from the blades and found Nye standing on the pebbled bank. And there it was, Nye's raw look, the one that betrayed Nye's thoughts. More shame knotted inside, tightening into an acidic ball, leaving him with a sickness he couldn't shake.

Wading back to shore, he set the swords carefully down on the stones.

"I thought you might be here last night." Nye's cheek fluttered. He looked at the crossed swords, probably considering the best way to launch into all the questions on his mind.

Wrapped in all black, he looked like the shadows he preferred to move among. Had this been night, Eroan wouldn't have seen him on the riverbank. It made Nye an effective hunter and a ruthless assassin. But in stark daylight, he seemed sharper, harder, like a piece of cut flint.

Eroan wrung out the damp ends of his hair and squeezed water from his shirt. "You shouldn't be here. Do you not have patrols?"

Nye's shapely eyebrow arched. He glanced behind him, where trees lined the bank, knowing they were unlikely to be disturbed. Few came to the falls. The roaring waters made it risky should anything bigger be out hunting.

"I thought you were gone." Nye's gaze tracked past Eroan to the plunge pool.

"I was." *A part of me still is.*

The elf's mouth twitched but not to find a smile. "We're not supposed to care," he said softly.

Eroan could hardly chide him. He'd cared too. But he'd let it all go when he'd walked away, his pride of elves walking to their deaths beside him. They weren't supposed to feel because it made leaving easier, but they *could* feel. If it hadn't been for the memory of Janna, Eroan might have lost his mind in the prisons.

"What were they like?" Nye asked. He tucked his thumb into a hip pocket and leaned to one side but still looked down, or out at the water, anywhere but at Eroan.

He didn't look at him because he knew what the dragons had done. Eroan felt unclean. Like he should turn and dive into the pool, and maybe the water would cleanse some of his soul. "You know."

Eroan was done here. He couldn't stomach the questions that would follow, not from Nye, not from anyone. He scooped up the swords and trudged up the bank, but when he turned back, Nye had waded into the water. The elf clasped his hands together and fully clothed, dove under, disappearing from sight.

Eroan scanned the surface, more curious than anything else.

When Nye resurfaced mid-stream, water plastered his black hair down his face. Treading water, he shook his head and ran both hands back through the locks, pulling them back from his face. The falls swallowed all sound, so all Eroan saw was the ludicrous smile on Nye's lips. A smile that tugged at his own.

He should get back to the village before Xena worried, or Curan came looking for them both. Or worse, Janna tracked him down here. But he was already soaked, so what were a few more minutes in the water? It was the only place his thoughts didn't bother him.

Nye was gone again, vanished beneath the surface.

Eroan set the swords down and strode into the water. When Nye broke the surface, Eroan stood at the edge of an underwater shelf. If he took a step farther, he'd plunge off the edge. Water lapped around his waist, tempting him closer. But he couldn't seem to bring himself to take that final step.

Nye saw him and swam close, but kept enough distance between them to leave questions hanging. This close to the waterfall where the water clouded the air and the falls thundered about them, there was no point to words, the roaring water would eat them. Eroan looked on, wondering too many things.

Nye's eyebrow arched, tilting his smile with it. Treading water, he crossed his arms over his chest and submerged. When he kicked back to the surface, he tossed the shirt behind Eroan, revealing the smooth roll of water-lapped dark-skinned shoulders.

Eroan wasn't supposed to be here, this wasn't supposed to happen. Janna and he... But Nye's long looks through the years had left Eroan wondering if the elf felt more than Order camaraderie. And then it had been Eroan's turn to take a pride to the tower, and he'd been gone with those things in Nye's gaze left unsaid. Nye kicked backward, and Eroan admired the contrast of hard muscle and smooth skin. Sunlight kissed at Nye's arms, down his chest, and into a narrow waist. A long, tightening pleasure started down low, enough for Eroan to adjust his trousers. Nye couldn't see how Eroan's body responded beneath the waterline. Although, from his smirk, he had likely guessed.

Nye rolled over and swam long-form to the opposite bank. He climbed out, and Eroan lost his thoughts in how the water glued the trouser fabric to Nye's hips and thighs. Nye reached up and ruffled his wet hair, knowing how Eroan watched. And when he padded along the bank, Eroan's gaze fell shamelessly to where Nye's trousers peaked.

It wouldn't have been right to entertain these thoughts before. Things had changed. Against all the odds, Eroan had returned. And now he had a second chance to explore the possibilities he hadn't allowed himself before, like the reason for Nye's long glances and heavy silences.

Eroan dove in and under. Warm water swallowed him whole. He kicked hard and remerged gasping, near the opposite bank, sweeping his hair back and searched for Nye. He must have vanished along the rock path where it wove its way behind the falls. There was nowhere else for him to go. Eroan

waded from the pool, short, sharp breaths betraying a renewed sense of anticipation and perhaps a little fear, though he quickly dismissed it and balanced along the narrow path to push through the curtain of water.

A memory tried to sink its claws in.

Water falling, pummeling his torn back, his fingers on the metal grate, blood swirling down the drain. And then Nye was there, propped against the rock wall like he had all the time in the world to wait for Eroan to take the bait.

This didn't have to mean anything. In fact, Eroan preferred it didn't. He stepped in, cupped Nye's face, tilted it up and almost fell into the kiss. But the male he imagined wasn't Nye. He let his eyes flutter closed and imagine another in his hands, a male with eyes of green and lips curved in a cocky, teasing smile. This male Eroan dreamed was a different kind of killer, not an elf at all, but his enemy, making his desire a forbidden thing. Eroan kissed Nye like he needed to breathe him in. He tasted all wrong, all elf, not dragon, but Eroan discarded that thought. His memory filled in the blanks and painted over the wrongs. Nye's smaller frame was replaced by the larger, more muscular design that Eroan had so wanted to touch but with his wrists bound, he'd never had the opportunity.

Eroan drove his tongue in, exploring Nye, taking the kiss, and Nye gave it all back, nipping and nudging, wanting more, coming alive in Eroan's hands. This heated kiss—this alone was worth the risk.

Eroan maneuvered Nye back against the rock face. Nye hissed, either in pain from the rocks or pleasure. His dark eyes said pleasure, and reckless need strummed through Eroan, notching the raw lust higher. He eased Nye's thighs apart, just enough for him to ride his hand up Nye's thigh and knead his hand against Nye's erect member through the trouser fabric. Nye let his head fall back, and Eroan ran his hand higher, pushed his thumb in and over. Nye bucked, growled a curse, and Eroan leaned in, pinning him still, his own desires coming undone. The sounds of Nye's panting matched his own. He bowed his head, brushing his chin against Nye's cheek, and imagined it was Lysander's jaw he ran his tongue along.

The prince had roused a sleeping beast in Eroan. A beast of want that had always been there but was only now stirring to life, stretching, filling him and breaking free.

"You've no idea how long I've wanted this..." Nye gasped. "Wanted you." He palmed Eroan's rigid arousal, molded his fingers and thumb

around it and worked it slowly. Sharp, desirable tingles darted through Eroan, stealing his breath, stealing his thoughts, almost his strength too. “I wasn’t sure...” Nye went on. “You were untouchable, like wildfire.”

Eroan listened, let the words sink in and shiver through him, but in them, he heard more than careless lust. Nye had cared. Eroan did too... but every touch was Lysander’s hand, every breath on his neck from Lysander’s lips. He remembered Lysander’s mouth on his arousal, his tongue working its magic, and even though it had been so wrong at the moment, so twisted and dark, by Alumn, it had felt so right.

Nye’s gaze fell on Eroan’s face, and guilt stabbed him in the chest. Eroan braced an arm against the rocks, suddenly ashamed that he’d think to use his friend like this. “I can’t do this...” *for you*, he wanted to finish. *Because you want more and I... don’t.*

Nye’s hand tightened and pulled. Blinding pleasure jerked Eroan’s hips toward the source of that delicious friction. “This says you do.” Nye locked a hand around the back of Eroan’s neck and pulled him into a fiery, plundering kiss.

Between Nye’s hand and his hot mouth, Eroan thought he might be losing his mind. But he knew one thing. He didn’t use people. He had more honor than that. The dragons hadn’t taken that last shred of decency from him.

He tore free of the kiss and breathed, “Nye, stop.”

“Don’t—” Nye let go but threw that arm around Eroan’s neck and held him close, so all Eroan saw was the fierceness in his friend’s eyes, one fractured with fear. He hadn’t meant to do this to Nye. “Don’t push me away when I’ve just found you again.”

The falls still raged behind Eroan, blocking out everything but Nye and Eroan’s own messed-up thoughts. Thoughts of a dragon he couldn’t have, thoughts of the very cruel and sharp desire cutting through him. “I can’t do this, Nye. It’s not... right.” He tried to pull free but Nye’s arm tightened, and Eroan’s paltry efforts fizzled to nothing.

“It doesn’t matter what was done to you. Nobody cares, Eroan. They love you for who you are. I...” Nye stopped, tripping over what came next.

Eroan kissed him to cover the words. He couldn’t stand to hear them. He wasn’t ready for this. He wanted Nye, but only because he was here, because Eroan could forget the horror he’d endured and make up some forbidden fantasy in his head that would cover it all.

“You don’t have to pretend with me,” Nye breathed. He arched his hips, giving himself to Eroan’s hand. “Don’t think. Just... just be here, just do this. The rest... the rest needn’t mean anything. Please...” Nye growled out the word like he hated it. “For so long I didn’t act and then you were gone. I need this. We both need this.”

Those words, they released him of guilt. His blood ached for this, ached for him to lose himself in someone. Anyone. Just so he could forget who he was supposed to be and who they had made him into.

Eroan gritted his teeth and tore at Nye’s belt, flicking it open, freeing the male’s taut erection. He had it hot in his hand in the next breath and had the male panting moments after. Harder, he pumped, feeling something ugly swell inside him. A hurt, a want, a muddle of things that didn’t make any sense.

“Wait, wait!” Nye brushed him off, shoved at Eroan’s shoulder and marched Eroan back against the rock face. “Take it slow, sassa...” Nye drawled.

Hard, cold rock sank into Eroan’s shoulders, reminding him of another wall, one buried deep within the bowels of the dragon’s tower. Old scars sizzled awake. His biceps burned from the strain of holding his arms above his head, wrists too, where the chains cut in. The chains were gone now, but in his mind, they were still there, weighing him down. Fresh, bitter panic fluttered in Eroan’s throat. “Nye, I can’t, not now—”

Nye plunged his tongue in, swallowing Eroan’s denials. Eroan couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. He heard the door rattle, saw the lantern light, saw the queen smile her slippery serpentine smile and felt his wrist shatter. She laughed. Hot hands on him. The bitter-sweetness of dragons on his tongue. Carline’s words to protect a lost prince. A severed cock forced down a bronze’s throat.

“Eroan... sassa...hear me?”

He blinked back to himself, back to the now and stared at the stranger searching his eyes for something that seemed to frighten him. Water roared, and the same cold, wet rocks cut into Eroan’s back. But no, this wasn’t the same place. Light played through the water here. What was this place?

“I’m sorry...” Nye said, blinking water from his eyes. “It’s too soon. I... Eroan, did I hurt you?”

I’m sorry. Don’t be sorry. Eroan blinked and Lysander was gone. Of course he was gone. He’d never been here. Nye was here. His friend. He

was home again. He rubbed at his wrists, surprised to find them chain-free. "No. I'm well. I just..." He looked down between them, at his limp member, at Nye's still proud and wanting and knew this couldn't happen. Not yet, maybe never.

Eroan rubbed a hand across his mouth and tucked himself away. What had he been thinking? "This was a mistake. Don't talk of this again."

Nye moved in, crowding too close. "It's too soon, that's all. I'll wait—"

"Don't fucking wait, Nye. Just get on with your life. I'm not back, I'll never be back. Get off me." Eroan shoved Nye aside and stepped to the ledge's edge. The waterfall raged in front of him, a rushing white wall... falling, falling, never-ending. "Get *over* me." He stepped off the ledge and plummeted into the pool.

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CHAPTER 31



After changing out of his wet clothes, Eroan was met with the formidable sight of Janna and Xena seated at Janna's main table. Cups of tea steamed in front of them. Xena's half-finished. He hadn't heard them at all while he'd been changing, but then he'd had other things on his mind.

"This looks like an ambush..." he drawled, adding a smile in hopes it would ease the tension.

They both smiled politely. Janna moreso. Xena had heard it all before. The lines around her eyes crinkled but that was all he was getting from the elder.

Eroan didn't feel much like sitting across from them. Restless energy still buzzed through his veins. He'd planned to head to the Order and see if anyone would take him up on some sparring sessions, but nobody dismissed Xena, not when she clearly had come for a reason that involved staying long enough to drink tea.

Eroan planted himself against the wall. "We haven't heard back from the prides yet. It'll be another day before they return with the teeth. I don't know what was used to shape the enamel, but I have some ideas..." He trailed off. Xena's soft smile somehow chided and patronized all at once. His gut told him he wasn't going to like why she'd come.

"That's not why I'm here."

He figured he knew why, especially when Janna suddenly found her tea so fascinating. She'd told Xena about his breakdown.

Eroan's mouth twitched. He rubbed at it. "You want to take me out of the Order?"

“Temporarily,” Xena confirmed, so careful and quiet. But therein lay her power. She didn’t need to argue. Whatever she said, whatever she wanted, it happened. Her word was law.

If he didn’t have the Order, what was he supposed to do? “I’m fine. There’s no need to remove me.”

“Take some time, Eroan.”

Time. What was time supposed to do? Somehow magic all the past away? Why did everyone keep telling him time would help? Time would do nothing but make the rot in him fester. “Time changes nothing.”

“Eroan,” Janna chided, nipping off his sharp tone.

Xena merely smiled and sipped at her tea. “Few here will understand what you’re going through. We live a sheltered life, protected behind the Order. Many don’t consider the sacrifices you make. They don’t like to think about the horrors beyond the village. Horrors you protect us from.”

And that was fine. He didn’t want everyone knowing what he’d done. He folded his arms over his chest and resigned himself to listen to the elder. Whatever she said, though, he wasn’t leaving the Order.

“Curan has offered to step up.”

So Curan had been speaking with her too.

“In your absence, he made a fine leader.”

“My absence?”

Xena’s eyes hardened. “When we experience terrible things, our instincts tell us to block it out and move on, but soon, there’s nowhere left to run and those memories catch up with us, usually at the worst possible time.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“It’s been less than two days, Eroan,” Janna said.

“You’ll be stepping down as the Order’s leader with immediate effect,” Xena went on. “I have another role for you. I would like you to be a part of the ruling council alongside me.”

She was retiring him. “An elder?” He couldn’t keep the scorn from his voice. “You want me to govern, to settle menial arguments, discuss border and harvests?” He snorted a dry laugh. “I’m not you, Xena.” He’d lose his mind if he had to stay in the village for the rest of his days knowing what awaited out there. No. He couldn’t do it. Wouldn’t do it.

“We need a strong warrior on the council.”

“You don’t need a strong warrior on the council, you need one out there.” He flung a hand at the door. Outside, the sounds of children laughing rang like distant celebration bells. Children he protected. A village he had spent his whole life protecting. He could not stop now.

Xena let the words settle, let the sounds drift into the hut. “And we need fathers.”

Eroan glanced at Janna and saw the flush creep up her pale cheeks. They’d already been discussing this. Over tea. She flicked her eyes up. “Children, Eroan. A family.”

The hope and desperate need in her voice only made him feel more wretched inside. Not only was he to be cut out of the Order, he was to be retired to some fatherly role he didn’t want.

“We haven’t heard from the East since you left,” Xena explained. “We know Cheen has lost its prime males. Their numbers are dwindling. Our numbers are dwindling. We need children, Eroan, or there will be nothing left for you to protect.”

Him? A father? He was barely in his prime. “Curan is ten years my senior. Have him retire.”

Xena blinked. “Curan has declined.”

“He gets a choice but I don’t?”

“Yes, of course. But not on the Order. You’re not to return to your role there until I am convinced you’ve sufficiently recovered from your trauma. Our warriors are too important. Perhaps, if you were to consider becoming an elder, you’d have the power you feel I’m taking from you now.”

He laughed and didn’t care that it sounded ugly. “Maybe you should tie my wrists to the wall? I see little difference.”

“Eroan!” Janna shot to her feet. Her cup toppled, spilling tea across the table. “Apologize immediately.” She turned to Xena. “I’m so sorry, he didn’t mean—”

“I meant it.” It had felt good to bite back, to watch the careful and polite rules come undone. He wanted to upset it some more, but then he caught Xena’s kind, understanding look and the spite deflated, leaving guilt and self-loathing behind.

“It’s all right,” Xena said, directing the words toward Eroan. “Your anger is perfectly normal. There will be more of it. It leaves you vulnerable and unstable, and you know it, Eroan, so do not stare back at me as though I am your enemy. I have seen terrible things, just as you have. You and I have

more in common than you realize. I know what those dragons are capable of. If you wish to talk, I am here for you.”

“I don’t need to talk. I need to act!” he snapped. “We need to build alliances with humans and share what I’ve learned regarding the new weapons. I can’t do that if you’re cutting me out, Xena. You need to reconsider this. I’ll not be retired to some menial role fathering children I don’t want.” Janna flinched. Eroan felt the words twist in his gut. It was too late to take it back now. “I can make a difference.”

“Yes, you can, as an elder. Now, if you’ll excuse me. We have an infant girl born just last night, and I’d like to meet her. Perhaps you should come, Eroan?”

He stared at the elder, his heart squeezing into something small and hard. “I can’t be what you want me to be.”

“You must. It’s your duty.”

He stared at the door long after she’d left and Janna cleared the spilled tea away. His duty? He’d given everything, his whole life, to the Order. He’d lived every second perfecting himself into a weapon. One to protect, one to kill, and in one normal, friendly conversation over tea, Xena had taken it all from him.

“I should have died.”

Janna gasped, shocking him into realizing he’d spoken aloud. The words were out now. He almost apologized, but what good would it do? It was true. He couldn’t be an elder, a father, that wasn’t his life, not now... before, maybe.

He looked around him, at hopeful Janna, at her modest hut with its neat little tables and chairs, quaint fireplace and bed. How could he ignore the monsters outside? Was he supposed to just pretend they didn’t exist? “I can’t do this.”

“Eroan, no.” She reached for him, tears shining in her eyes.

He backed away, feeling betrayed. “You know I can’t be a father to your children. You know this! You’ve always known this...”

He left her weeping, hearing her sobs long after he’d entered the Order’s long meeting hut. The flights hadn’t returned. It didn’t matter. He took two daggers from the racks, unbuttoned his shirt, giving himself room to move, and stood in the center of the training floor. It was quiet here, and with the blades in his hands, his mind was a quiet place too.

He started the familiar motions, sweeping the daggers through the air, his muscles remembering each stance without him having to think through it. Like a dance he'd known his whole life, he fell into the rhythm. The ache in his wrist made his right hand stiff. He worked with it, using the pain and the memory to make each thrust fatal, each slice vicious. He practiced until his arms burned and his shirt clung to him, but anger was still there. If anything, it was worse, like a demon on his back.

The more he tried to fight it off, the more it sunk its claws in.

He straightened back into a neutral pose and tried to channel the rage into something cleaner, something he could use.

"Xena spoke with you," Curan grumbled behind him.

Eroan tightened his grip on the daggers and tried to steady his breathing. "Lead the Order if you want, but I'm not leaving."

"I didn't want this, but you must see it's for the best."

Eroan flicked the blades in his hands and returned them to the rack, placing them firmly home, only then could he meet Curan's gaze. The pity in the older elf's eyes felt like betrayal, like they'd seen him return with a collar around his neck and thought him weakened or changed. Tainted. Clearly, they didn't want that rot in the Order.

Curan brushed a hand over his hair and down the back of his neck. "You'll see, eventually, that we're trying to help you."

He could see that. And this wasn't Curan's fault. Had Eroan been the one standing there and watching their leader fall apart, he would have done exactly the same. The Order was too important to allow its weakest link to hold it up.

"You're right," Eroan sighed.

Curan lifted his head.

"The Order is my life. I'll protect it at any cost, including removing myself from command." Eroan approached until he stepped inside Curan's space. "But I won't be set aside like a broken blade."

"Xena's orders were explicit—"

"I've seen their inner workings; how weak they are together. With the queen gone, they're in turmoil. It will take time for them to pick a new ruler and settle. There will be power struggles. While they're focused on their own ranks, we can strike as a united force. Humans and elves, and we do it for the first time with weapons that can bring them down from the skies."

The older elf frowned. "With swords?"

“Not swords. Arrows.”

“Arrows? We’d need a thousand to bring down a single dragon. We don’t have a thousand archers left.”

Eroan smiled. “Not a thousand. Just two. Tipped with dragons’ teeth.”

“Two?” Curan frowned and mumbled, “I can’t decide if you’ve lost your mind or if you’re a genius.”

Eroan patted him on the shoulder and headed out. “A little of both, my friend.”

Nye jogged into the main hut, Eroan’s dragonblades in his hand. “Three of the prides returned early. They were ambushed by a stray. One is missing.” He handed out the swords.

“Which one?” Eroan asked, throwing the swords on. Xena be damned. He wasn’t sitting back, not for her, not for anything.

“Seraph’s.”

Nye collected a brace of daggers and nodded at Curan. The older elf locked his questioning sights on Eroan.

Eroan waited for the words that would shut him out and push him aside. Curan was the leader now, and Eroan obeyed the Order above all else, above even Xena. Always had. If the elf said the word for him to stay behind, then Eroan would be faced with breaking his oath to the Order, and that was not something he could take back. It would be over for him. Curan, not Xena, held Eroan’s destiny in his hands.

Curan nodded. “Let’s go.”

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CHAPTER 32



On approach, draped in duskligh, the huge bones arching out of the ground looked like bent trees leaning into the wind. But there were no trees here. Nothing larger than moss and brush grew where dragons left their dead.

Eroan climbed lightly over a half-buried hip bone and dropped down the other side, weaving between the enormous ribcage and a tumble of boulders. The source of the great huffing he'd heard from over a mile away became clear as he vaulted over a ridge of tail bones. A dragon lay on its belly. A small one, although still large enough to swallow an elf in one bite. Its enormous lungs heaved, expanding its chest, and cool, flinty eyes found Eroan, then skipped to Curan and Nye behind him. Someone had tied its snout with vines, hence the huffing. Its wings, clamped to its sides, had been bound in much the same way. On closer inspection, the vines holding its legs and neck had frayed and would continue to unravel.

Eroan scanned the barren landscape of rock and bone and spotted the pride of five elves tucked inside a depression in the earth. He was about to wave Curan on and hand-signal Nye to stay with the dragon when he remembered he wasn't in command and this wasn't his call.

Curan nodded at Eroan, reading the obvious commands anyway and Nye dropped his chin and maneuvered toward the trapped beast.

"We're losing the light," Curan said. "Best make this quick."

Eroan had noticed. There were more dangers in the dark than pinned young dragons. He hesitated a few yards from the pride and frowned at their hushed bickering. Hussan's leg had been fixed inside a makeshift splint and they seemed to be arguing over whether to leave, split up, or stay.

None of them had seen Eroan approach. "I'm tempted to leave them out here all night just to see who survives," he said quietly to Curan.

Curan huffed a dry, subdued chuckle. "Survival of the fittest only works if one lives."

The pride saw them then and stopped their bickering. Seraph, proud thing that she was, stepped up to Eroan's approach first. "We were dealing with it," she told him, her chin up, eyes fierce.

He leaned around her to get a good look at the shamed faces. "I can see that. And what would have happened when the dragon broke free? Do you think it was just going to fly off and forget all about the pride of elves that ambushed it?"

"No, I—"

"Or do you think it might have come back with five of its bigger, hungry brood?"

She winced. The twitching in her flushed cheek betrayed her anger. Her face was all scratched up and the earring he'd told her to remove had clearly been returned to her ear because now it was missing again, along with her ear tip. A dried dribble of blood marked her face and neck. She'd fought here, and well. All of them had. But without the kill, it wasn't over, and could easily have ended in their deaths. Still could. A dragon was at its most dangerous when pinned down.

"What were you going to do with it exactly?"

"Kill it," she hissed like he was the fool for asking.

Eroan glanced behind him at the panting beast. "So why haven't you?"

"I'll move the others on." Curan gathered up the others and organized the best way of carrying Hussan over the rocks.

Satisfied Curan had their survival in hand, Eroan returned to Seraph. She glared up and through Eroan, reminding him so much of himself, he almost laughed aloud. Instead, he freed one of the dragonblades. Her eyes fluttered at the sight of it and again when he planted the handle in her hand. "Come."

He led Seraph back to Nye at the dragon's trapped head. The beast's big eyes, glassy and bright, didn't blink, just observed.

"Your restraints are lacking," Nye said, flatly. "Another hour and it would have wriggled free."

"They held this long," Seraph growled back.

“This is the part where you listen,” Eroan said, hiding the smirk at hearing her backtalk.

The dragon huffed harder, blasting them with dust. At the lower section of its neck, where the scales met its chest, an orange glow throbbed like a second heartbeat. The firepit, where their liquid flame churned. The second this one got free, it would have turned the graveyard and Seraph’s pride to ash. And it wouldn’t have stopped there. More dragons would have come, searching for the village.

“You want the kill?” Eroan said. She nodded, losing her smart remarks. “You’ve earned it.”

Her eyes widened, that infamous elven pride swelling. But it would all be for nothing if she couldn’t end it.

Eroan roamed his gaze over the beast’s snout and face. This one had a narrow, long nose, but like all the others, it had a crown of smooth, hardened scales atop its head. Those scales brushed together now, sending a loud warning rattle. It wasn’t very old, Eroan considered. Its crown was small, not fully developed. The shimmering scales implied it was a jeweled dragon, likely from the amethyst brood.

“Behind the horns, you see them,” he pointed at the beast’s head.

Seraph nodded.

“There’s a weak spot beneath that crown, where they raise those scales to rattle. It leaves their skin unprotected. There was little we could do before beyond annoying them, but now...” He dropped his gaze to the sword in her hand. “You need to thrust it in strong and true. You won’t get a second chance.”

Pride glittered in her eyes. She set her lips into a firm, determined line and started the climb up the creature’s forelimb. The dragon panted harder and strained against its restraints. Its eyes narrowed on Eroan. Topaz eyes, Eroan saw. What had it been doing out here alone? Were they in such turmoil that this one had gone hunting on its own?

The beast’s lips rippled and a growl bubbled up its throat.

“Do you think its mother will come looking?” Nye asked.

Seraph clambered along its ridged neck, her approach awkward with the sword in her hand. Eroan felt his own heart stutter in anticipation. “No,” he said. He heard the queen’s wicked laughter and met this beast’s glare. “They don’t care for their young like elves do.”

Who was this dragon kit? Just another scrambling infant trying to survive its siblings? Was that why he'd fled? To survive? Eroan found he couldn't care less. This dragon's death would be the first of many to come.

The vines groaned. He swallowed the urge to tell Seraph to hurry. This was her kill. A long time ago he'd been an eager assassin too. Too eager, too confident, thought he'd known it all. His first kill had almost killed him, but she'd decided to play with her prey instead of just swallow it down. It was a mistake that dragon paid for with her life.

The beast bucked, and a vine snapped. "Now!" Eroan pulled the second blade free, and Nye freed his daggers. Vines unraveled from its forelimbs and snapped from around its snout. Fire bubbled up its throat. It lifted its head, scales rattling.

Seraph punched her blade in, clean and surgical. The beast jolted, slumped, and collapsed forward with a heavy *whomp*, blasting up dust and stones, throwing Seraph clear.

Eroan ran to her side and pulled her to her feet. She spluttered, wheezed, and saw the fallen beast. Fire spilled from between its teeth and simmered over rock. Cold, dead eyes stared at nothing. It didn't seem so frightening a thing now all the fire had snuffed out of its eyes.

She smiled, and Eroan grinned back. "They're not invincible."

"Come," Nye urged. "Wolves will smell the carcass."

Seraph offered Eroan the bloodied sword.

"Keep it. We're going to make more."

Her smile grew, and the steel armor Eroan had clamped around his heart to keep it safe broke open just a little.



ANOTHER DRAGON dead and with the village safe for a little while longer, the people celebrated. Eroan admired their ability to dance and sing like all was right in the world. The younger Order members fawned over Seraph who delighted in showing them her bandaged ear. Hussan hobbled out to join in with the revelry. Curan managed to both scold and praise them all in equal measure, and Eroan watched it all from the sidelines.

Janna had avoided him since his return. And Nye acted like nothing had happened, just as he'd asked. He should have felt relieved, joyous even, so

why then, did Eroan feel like he was going through the motions?

He ducked into Janna's hut and found her hanging her bow and quiver, both freshly cleaned. The hut smelled of wood oil and leather. "Not celebrating?"

"I will..." she stretched onto her tiptoes and adjusted the quiver so it wouldn't slip off its hook. Her slip of a shirt sat lightly on her hips, hugged her waist, and cupped her breasts. Lightweight and dark, it made for good, silent camouflage when moving through the trees.

She dropped to her feet, smiled carefully, and tucked her hair behind her ear. "You?"

He'd often accompanied her hunting and admired her stealth. Few could match her patience at stalking. She'd once waited a day, from dawn 'til dusk, for a deer herd to roam close enough for her arrow to deliver dinner. In all that time, the herd hadn't sensed her in the grass.

"I owe you an apology." He helped spread her stack of arrows across the table and watched her examine each tip, checking for damage. Lithe fingers stroked down each shaft, her touch slowing under his gaze.

"I'm trying to think around these things in my head, trying to make it right and it's not as easy as it should be," he admitted.

"I understand."

"I know you do." The music started up again outside, tugging on Eroan's heartstrings. He couldn't remember the last time he'd danced without a blade in his hand. "You should be out there."

She took his hand suddenly, planted it on her hip and lifted the other to her shoulder. "Or we could dance right here?"

They had danced before, and sung, and gotten tipsy on grape-wine, explored and tested, hunted and ran, tumbled in leaves, laughed in the rain. In all the years since the Order had found him abandoned, Janna had been a constant. His friend.

She swayed against him and flattened her hand against his back, drawing him close.

"Janna..."

"I know, but don't spoil it."

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, breathing in *home*, and together they swayed as one.

"You think I didn't know all those years, Eroan?"

“Know what?” He liked it here, in her arms, listening to her heart thump, feeling her curves pressed close, feeling her soft, warm and alive beneath his hands.

“That you and I would never be more?”

“Then you figured it out before I did, because I didn’t know until—”

“I remember. The messenger from Cheen. I knew it the second you laid eye on him. You’ve never looked at me like that. I wasn’t surprised.”

“I was.” Eroan fought with a smile. “He taught me some interesting things that night.”

Janna laughed and thwacked him on the arm. “Eroan! I’m trying to be earnest here.”

“Sorry, please continue being earnest. Tell me more of this messenger. I’m not sure I remember correctly—”

“Oh, you!” She tried to pull away, perhaps to go and join the celebrations, but he caught her arm, reeled her in so she fit perfectly against him, and gently kissed her smile. They had always played like this, but while Eroan knew they’d been fooling around, he’d also known, for Janna, it had been different. Her smile opened, lips parting like soft petals. He tasted their sweetness, letting it sit lightly on his tongue. She was a gentle thing, a fragile thing in his rough hands. He didn’t want to break her. His thoughts weren’t gentle, not now. They had been, but not anymore, not since he’d returned bathed in blood.

She fluttered her hands against his face, scared to touch and her eyes shone with all the wonder and hope he now lacked.

“I want to kill them all for what they did to you,” she said. So fierce, his Janna, even as her tears fell. He loved her, always had, but it was a soft, friendly affection.

He kissed a tear away. Her hands dropped to his shoulders, and he kissed another tear from her cheek. Shifting onto her toes, her mouth met his, tongue nudging deeper. Heat simmered low, leading Eroan’s thoughts and hands astray. He slid his touch down her arms, around her waist and pushed over her rear, clutching her ass tight enough to bring a gasp to her lips. Pulling her in, he ground his hardening arousal into her hip. Now her eyes shone for a different reason.

“Don’t tease,” she warned, her voice carrying a sharp, warning tone.

Eroan gathered her hair to one side and kissed the curve of her neck where her pulse fluttered. “Why not? When you seem to like it?”

“*Alumn*, I missed you,” she breathed, sinking her hands down his back to pull his shirt free. “She told me to move on, that you were dead.”

“I’m impossible to forget,” he whispered into the corner of her mouth while his fingers unbuttoned her shirt.

She chuckled. “Maybe I did?” She pushed on his chest, leveraging some room between them, and unbuttoned the fastenings he hadn’t gotten to yet. “Maybe I found your messenger from Cheen and asked him to show me what he’d shown you.”

Now those memories were ones Eroan welcomed. The dark-haired delight from Cheen had been a vision of a male. One who had opened Eroan’s eyes to many, many possibilities. He willingly recalled the male’s tongue on him now as Janna’s sweet face turned serious and wicked and wanting. His trouser fabric tightened over his erection like the messenger’s teasing fingers had. But now it wasn’t the messenger Eroan imagined, but a green-eyed prince who had looked at him as though he held the world in his hands. Eroan recalled precisely how the messenger had spread his thighs and clamped his ass in rough hands. He imagined it differently now, imagined it was Lysander’s hands on his hips, Lysander’s erection pushing in close.

Eroan fell on Janna, his mouth a tingling, buzzing thing that needed more. She squeaked as he tore open the shirt and claimed her waist. Then her deft hands were tugging his belt free, shoving his trousers down, finally freeing his hot, aching erection. Her hand went around him, light but tight. He imagined it was the prince’s hand and felt his thoughts spiral. His body became a single, straining knot of want. He shouldn’t be thinking this and didn’t care as the thoughts came faster, thoughts of Lysander’s velvety want pushing into his center.

“Turn around,” he hissed.

Janna twisted to face away. She sent the arrows scattering from the table and fell forward to clutch at its edges and ground her ass against him.

Eroan was losing his mind. He pushed her trousers down, took his arousal and stroked with his left hand while sliding his right between Janna’s legs, over her silky entrance to the tiny, tight button. Janna spat a foul curse, one that had a smile tug at Eroan’s lips and a bead of pre-cum leak from his head.

“Eroan,” she begged, his name a breathless gasp. “*Please.*”

He angled his head at her wet opening, delaying as long as his mind could stand, until she jerked back, taking him in and then he lost it all. Lost control, lost his thoughts, lost his mind. He thrust deep, filling her up until his thighs met the backs of hers. She mumbled something, making it sound a lot like begging. There was no holding back, no restraint. Deeper, faster, he pumped, skin on hot skin. Pleasure knotted harder, tighter, singing through his whole body. Hate was there too, feeding the ugly, twisted thing inside of him that wanted more hurt, more pain. But not here, not with her. He'd known she'd wanted this for a long time.

Her knuckles whitened at the table's edge. She said his name, ground it out, screaming it.

Eroan clutched her hips, adjusted the angle, and pounded himself deep until it wasn't about the feel of her or the memory of a prince, but had become a blinding all-consuming madness. He tried not to think of Lysander's mouth, of the dragon's flicking tongue, and failed spectacularly. The crescendo built, cresting, coming. More. He needed it. Deeper. Harder. Janna cried out, panting and clutching at him like an animal and he filled his thoughts of Lysander rising behind him, Lysander coming deep, his teeth and fingers digging into Eroan's back. He wanted that male on him, in him, in all ways. And the fact it was wrong only made him want it more. The kiss. He remembered that one, careful, drunken kiss while he'd hung in chains. A kiss that had lit a fire in Eroan's belly that had never stopped burning.

Pleasure burst. A ragged cry slipped from his lips. He stuttered, his solid, sensitive arousal releasing, freeing, spilling electric shivers through his veins. Pleasure crested to the tip of pain and then rolled back again, freeing him to breathe again.

Janna turned her head, her lips full and face flushed. She tilted her hips, smiling her delight as Eroan gasped, the pleasure too sharp, too much. He fell forward and mouthed her shoulder, tasting her shudders.

"Eroan Ilanea, you are a wicked, surprising thing."

Bracing a hand against the table, he leaned close, sinking into her gaze. "Give me a minute and I'll surprise you some more."

CHAPTER 33



Sunlight streamed in through the windows, and the pine-scented breeze fluttered the drapes. Outside, the village lay soft and quiet.

A pile of reclaimed dragon teeth waited in the Order building, but Eroan couldn't bring himself to move from Janna's arms. Maybe last night had been a mistake. But Janna wasn't Nye. She wanted only what he was willing to give. She loved him like he loved her, as friends, didn't she?

She might think differently after last night.

He stretched, naked beneath the sheets and trapped under Janna's carelessly flung arm and leg. They'd fooled around over the years but had never let things go that far.

Did it matter? Wasn't this how it would be now anyway if Xena had her way? His mood shifted, his chest tightening.

As the sun brightened, lifting over the village, he heard chatter from outside. Normalcy. He hadn't been sure he'd ever feel it again.

Janna's fingers circled a nipple. He looked down at her sleepy face and mussed-up hair. She pulled her hand back from the circular scar around his nipple. She'd seen the scars on his chest and back last night. It hadn't mattered in their madness, but now, in the sleepy morning light, he could feel the questions building.

"I need to work on the weapons..." He threw the sheet off and planted his feet outside the bed. She plastered herself to his back, nuzzling his neck in that spot she'd found last night. The one that yanked him out the moment and dumped a ton of lust in his veins.

"Don't go. Spend the day here, with me." Her morning voice turned sultry and dark.

He breathed in and held that breath, sorely tempted to lie back down and lose himself in her all over again. “You need to go hunt.”

“Then tonight?”

She trailed her tongue over his bare shoulder, sending a cascade of shivers down his back. “Janna, this... this doesn’t change anything.”

And she was gone, withdrawing, dragging the sheet with her. When he looked, she leaned against the wall and blinked at the ceiling.

“It’s fine.”

It clearly was not fine, but he knew better than to argue. Dressing quickly, he preferred to escape now before this descended into an argument he didn’t want and wouldn’t win.

“Maybe I should have moved on,” she said.

“Xena was right.” He shrugged on his shirt and laced it up. “You should have. I’m not the only handsome male here, you know. Although, you’ll struggle to find someone who’ll compare. What about the elf who follows you around like a lost puppy? What’s his name? Rand... No, Ross? He clearly doesn’t compare to my effortless perfection, but I hear he has stamina.”

Her lips twitched. She gathered her pillow and tossed it at him with a laugh. “Get out, you rat. Go play with your teeth. I’m going to trek to Cheen and find the messenger.”

Eroan avoided the flying pillow and ducked for the door. “If you do, make sure you bring him back with you. I’m not opposed to a threesome—”

“Go! You fiend!”

He slammed the door on her laugh and chuckled, crossing the village yards. Children scattered, chasing one another with green ribbons tied to their belts. A hunting party had gathered near the grand hall, readying their weapons and discussing their route. An elf he recognized but couldn’t recall her name carried a bundle of logs. Normalcy. The Order didn’t see much of it, just enough to know it was worth protecting at all costs. Assassins of the Order were forever apart from the community. Guardians. Soldiers. Anything the village and Xena needed them to be, but not part of it.

And now Xena needed him to stand beside her.

His mouth twisted. How could he set aside his entire way of life? He wasn’t ready, but after last night, he imagined he might be one day. A future. He’d never allowed himself to think of it. A life, a real life, as part of the community, not skirting its fringes. Would it be so bad a thing?

He pushed into the Order house to find Curan and Nye already inside examining and sorting bundles of dragon teeth. Eroan counted fifty teeth. It wasn't enough. "We need more."

"I thought you said we only needed two?" Curan's smirk held its own playful humor. Eroan hadn't missed the way he'd handled the teeth, admiring their curves and structure. The older elf was impressed.

"Two per dragon, if we don't miss. But how many dragons are there? We get one shot to hit them hard. I'm not prepared to blow it because we've run out of teeth." A few hundred thousand dragons infested the lands, at least, he figured. By Curan's scowl, the male figured the same.

"All right," Curan grumbled. "I'll organize the prides into retrieving more."

"All of the teeth. Every single one. And if we can, we go to other graveyards and get those too."

"We'll need help..." Curan rubbed at his chin, turning his thoughts over.

They'd need more than just help. All the Orders from every village would need to act on this. "Contact Cheen. See if they can spare some hands."

"What for?" Nye finally asked. He'd been silently scrutinizing each curved tooth and set one of the larger ones down among the pile. "How are we going to shape these teeth into weapons? I've tried to scratch them; steel blades slide right off. They're as hard as granite."

"We can't shape them, we don't have the means, but humans can. They had forges. They once created iron-tripped war-machines. These teeth just need to be softened enough to carve into shape. They can do it."

"But you don't *know* it's possible. We don't even know if there are any humans left?"

Eroan recalled the conversations he'd overheard between the queen and the bronze chief. "There are. They continue to assault the bronze lines. They're still fighting."

Nye's expression opened with curiosity and awe. Eroan waited for the questions to begin—exactly how he knew these things—but Nye just wet his lips and looked down at the teeth.

"You know this will work. You saw Seraph use the blade to kill the kit. We can strike back for the first time since it all began. Elves haven't fought them in force in generations. The queen is dead. We can do this." *I can do this.*

“It’s a risk.” Curan lifted his gaze. “If we start mobilizing, the dragons will notice. We’ve survived this long by staying small and quiet, keeping to pockets hidden in the forest—”

Hiding was not living. “And how long do you think we’ll survive like that? The queen is dead, but a ruler will rise and again we’ll be sending assassins to their deaths. We’re killing our best. It’s fruitless. We need to hit them hard or not at all.” Eroan wrapped his fingers around a tooth and lifted it between them. “This is the only way. Humans have the means to shape these, to use them. They just need the knowledge.”

“And you’re going to take it to them?” Nye asked, eyes glinting behind long, dark lashes. “You’re going to break through the bronze line and cross the ocean, give them these blades, and then what?” His friend’s tone deepened. “Come back through the bronze line again? As easy as that? Just cross an ocean and back again, just stroll on through a thousand dragons because you’re Eroan Ilanea and you’re what, invincible now?”

“Nye...” Curan warned.

“He has a death wish,” Nye snarled. “He’ll charge into anything, not caring if he lives or dies. Even hoping he dies...”

Eroan quenched his own rising anger and tossed the tooth into the pile. “I’m an Assassin of the Order. It’s what we do. Or have you forgotten?”

Nye laughed. “You make it an obsession and I’ll play no part in it.” He stormed through the door.

Eroan waited until he heard Nye’s boots stop thumping in the dirt and turned to Curan only to find their leader with a single eyebrow raised. “I need his head clear,” Eroan said. “He was always focused. Like this, he’s useless to the Order. What by Alumn happened to him?”

“You did.”

Eroan winced and leaned against the table, turning his face away from Curan’s glare. “Don’t put this on me. I’m carrying enough already. He just...” He closed his eyes and rubbed at the back of his neck, scratching over healing sores. Opening his eyes again, Curan was still watching and looking at him like this was all his fault. “I get it, I do. The queen is dead, the Order succeeded, he gets to live. We all get to live, but for how long? Just because she’s dead doesn’t mean it’s over. You see that, don’t you?”

“I do.” Curan rumbled. “But you don’t need to do this. I can take it to the Ashford Higher Order—”

“The Higher Order are all full of air.” Taking it to Ashford would just delay things. They couldn’t afford to wait for council members to discuss and argue and vote. “This must happen now.”

“You can have a life *now*. Do you even understand what a gift that is? Because I don’t think you do. Xena gave you a way out.”

Eroan gritted his teeth and hissed through them, “I don’t want a way out.”

Curan sniffed and straightened. “You don’t want to hear it, but you need to. You’re so desperate to leave. It’s easier than staying.” Curan saw Eroan flinch. “We’ve sent hundreds of assassins into the night and none thought they’d ever return, though we prayed to Alumn for it. *You* came back.”

Eroan dragged a hand down his face, trying to clear the fluttering anxiety beginning to turn his insides over. “You sound like Xena.”

“Then maybe you’ll listen? You’ve done enough, Eroan. We’ll do this, we’ll get you the extra hands, we’ll find a way to get this knowledge to the humans, I’ll send a messenger to Ashford, but it’s not your fight.”

Not his fight? Eroan shot the older male a raw glance. “You’re the one not listening to me. I need this.” He gestured at the teeth piled high. “I have to do this. It has to be me.”

“Why?”

How could he tell him, his oldest friend besides Janna. In the absence of parents, Eroan had admired Curan as he imagined one admired their father, and now even he was trying to shut Eroan out. He glared at the closed door and ground his teeth. “I can’t stand the way they look at me like I’m some returning deity. Those people out there, my people, I love them, but they think I’m something I’m not.”

“They love you.”

He knew that and hated it. “They love the *idea* of me, Curan. I came back. I killed the queen.” He sighed, and whispered, “Only, that’s not what happened.”

Curan opened his mouth to argue or brush off Eroan’s words, but he’d asked Eroan why this meant so much, and the Order leader was getting the truth. All of it. Eroan needed this wretched thing out of him before it ate his insides and turned all of him dark.

“I didn’t kill the queen.” The words were out now, and he couldn’t take them back. Needling anxiety prickled his back. “Her son killed her. Do you want to know what I did while that was happening? Why I’m so heroic? I

lived. That's all. I survived." His words trembled now, but it didn't matter. The truth was coming, and it was time he set it free. "They chained me to a wall, carved into me, kept me from the light. I thought I was dying, for so long, I thought I was a dead thing."

Curan turned his face away. "Eroan, you don't need to tell me—"

"The night the queen died, I was tied to her bed about to be violated by her and her son." His voice cracked like the thing inside split open and spilled out its darkness. "Do you have that image in your head now, because I do."

"Eroan."

"No. You want to know why? I'm telling you." He straightened and squared up to Curan, watching the male's throat bob around a gulp. "A flight of bronze stole me from the tower, in chains, threw a bag over my head. They had some plan to take me to their brood on the frontline, only one of them decided he'd like to try to fuck an elf before they got there."

Curan's mouth twisted downward in disgust.

"I only lasted as long as I did because her son kept..." Eroan growled a stammer clear. "Because he kept saving me. I'm not a hero, Curan. I'm not a returning triumphant assassin who did the impossible and felled the Dragon Queen. I just didn't die." Curan opened his mouth to speak, but Eroan's next words cut him off. "And to make it worse. *I liked it.*" Gods, he'd said it. He'd said the vicious truth and the sickness was back, and that ugly thing inside of him was awake and hungry again. "I wanted the prince to fuck me because it meant I'd feel again and it was all I could focus on. Nothing else in that wretched place made any sense."

"Eroan, stop," Curan growled. "I can't hear these things from you."

"You can't? I don't care whether you can hear it or not. It happened. I need to take these teeth away from here because I can't be your fucking leader, I can't be Janna's mate or a father, and I can't be some elder you all look up to. I'm just another assassin thrown at her walls. Only for some reason, this time, her son saved me."

Curan's mouth twisted. "Don't." He tried to turn, but Eroan found himself sinking his fingers into the elf's shoulder, pulling him back, making him hear.

"You were right, Curan. I'm not fit to be here." The next words burned his tongue. "Because I *liked* what they did to me."

“Alumn, damn you, Eroan!” Curan grabbed Eroan’s shoulders as though to shake, shove or hit him, but did neither. “Get out of this Order house and do not return.”

Eroan’s chest heaved, his wounded heart breaking. “What did you think the collar was for? Decoration?”

Curan yanked him close. “You are dismissed from the Order, and you will not return to its ranks. Do you understand?” The older male shoved Eroan toward the door, almost knocking him off his feet.

Eroan caught the wall to wedge himself up. “Perfectly,” he muttered. Then he was gone.



THE WHITELADY FALLS GROWLED and hissed, drowning out the thoughts in Eroan’s head. He sat on the bank and threw pebbles into the pool until daylight faded and shadows stretched far and long. Returning after dusk when the village was quiet again, he bundled an armful of dragon teeth, threw on a fitted fur-lined trekking coat and the remaining dragonblade sword, and crept from the village, into the night.

He hadn’t gotten far when a whisper of movement from behind pricked his ears. “Go back, Seraph.”

“You’re leaving again.” She hopped down from a branch above, landing in a crouch and marched at him like an arrow, direct and full of determination.

“Some things have to be done, and sometimes, there’s only one person who can do them.”

She frowned. “If you’re trying to sound like Xena, you’re awful at it.”

He smiled and nodded at the sword handle peeking over her shoulder. “Wearing it on the back, huh?”

She shrugged, jolting the sword. “Makes it easier to carry through the trees. It kept getting snagged when I had it at my hip.”

He nodded and glanced at the path he would be taking ahead of him. Looking back, Seraph toed at the leaf litter. She saw him watching and said, “I want to come with you.”

“No.”

“I can help. You’re going to the humans. While you rest, I can stand watch. You’ve always told me we travel in prides of more than two. Always.” The words fell out of her in a rush.

“Seraph, I’m going through bronze lines. If anything were to happen—”

“I’m an Assassin of the Order. This is what I do, Eroan!”

Her words struck at the hard stone inside him. Words so much like the ones he’d said to Nye. She’d overheard his conversation in the Order. Probably been listening the whole time. “Well, I’m not with the Order, not anymore.” He turned his back on her and started on. “Go back. I’m not handing the dragons another elven life.”

“You can’t go alone.”

“I can.”

“You’ll die.” She caught his arm, yanking him to a stop.

He looked down at the small hand on his sleeve and up at her face. Maybe if he’d stayed, maybe if he’d had it in him to settle with Janna, he’d one day rear a feisty, defiant daughter like her. But that was not to be, not for him.

He kissed her quickly on the forehead. “Protect them.”

“Until you get back? You are coming back?”

“Until I get back.” He gave her a small smile, hoping it might ease her mind.

She took his hand and dropped a tiny green earring into his palm. “Take it. So you know you’re not alone.”

A knot tightened his throat. He swallowed, trying to clear it, but didn’t quite manage it, and whispered, “Thank you.”

She flicked her own stubby ear and smiled shyly. “It’s not like I can wear it anymore anyway.”

He backed up. “Don’t tell them I’ve left. By the time they realize, I’ll be days away.”

She nodded. “I know I’ll see you again. This isn’t goodbye.”

With a sad smile, he nodded, turned, and plunged into the brush.

CHAPTER 34



Lysander

THE DRUG WAS MADE from plants, Mirann had said. And some other shit Lysander couldn't remember. All he knew was how, when the grainy powder touched his tongue, it took him far, far away from the stifling heat, the constant sweet smell of sweat, and filled out the hollowness inside.

In the weeks since he'd collapsed in the mud outside the bronze line, Mirann had been a constant. When she didn't have her hands on his cock, she was in his head, directing his thoughts. And it worked, in as much as he could fuck her hand and finish, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He was stuck in a downward spiral, and just when he thought he might be climbing out of the dark, Mirann was there, the drug touched his tongue, and the spiral kept on moving down.

"Dokul will know if you're drugged during the coupling." She had told him the same over and over, but the more he let the drug numb him, the more he needed it. With it, he was a creature with simple needs, needs she kept meeting, but without it, the world got complicated and the memories tackled him all over again. His mother's murder, his brother's attack, Dokul looming, Mirann pulling his strings... That reality wasn't somewhere he wanted to be.

Until now. With a day left until the coupling, Mirann hadn't come, and Lysander paced his room, ready to tear his skin off to rid himself of the

crawling need. “I can’t stand this.” He needed out. He needed to breathe. He needed to *fly*—great gods he ached to fly.

He flung open the door and strode from the room. There had to be somewhere he could go, somewhere he wouldn’t be watched or guarded and leered at.

“Lysander...”

Mirann. Fucking Mirann. She blocked his retreat and reached to touch him like all the bronze did. Constant touches. Fingers stroking, digging, gripping.

“Don’t...” He pushed her off. “I need to shift, okay? Somewhere outside. Is there somewhere I can go where I won’t be seen?”

Scorn darkened her face. She looked at him like that when he’d failed to do something for her, to say the right things, to release his seed at her command.

He grabbed her wrists and shoved her against the tunnel wall. “Unless you want a fucking dragon filling this corridor, tell me where I can go now!”

She twisted her wrists under his hands and smiled—*liking* the pain. Lysander jerked away from her and carried right on walking. There had to be somewhere. He didn’t care where, just so long as it wasn’t this tunnel. He needed space.

“Don’t.” She caught up with him.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t shift. Use it.”

“Use it...?” he laughed. She made it sound like his anger was a tool, like something he could wield. “The last time I used it, I killed my mother. Do you want to die tomorrow while we fuck for your whole nightmare of a brood to see?” Wild magic spritzed through his veins, twitching his fingers. All of this felt wrong. The bronze brood, Mirann, the drug in his veins. He didn’t want this, had never wanted it, but somehow here he was, underground, buried among dragons he despised.

“Wait... when you killed her, what were you doing?”

Her question jolted him to stop. *I’d been doing an elf*, he thought with a sharp grin. “I told you. It was kill her or fuck her.”

She circled around and blocked his path again, sizing him up with slitted eyes. “Then that’s it.”

“Get out of my way, Mirann.”

Her grin was a horrible, slippery thing. “I just need to make you rage, prince.” Her fist hit him like an oar.



LYSANDER CAME TO, blinking into flickering torches—like the bastards didn’t have enough heat in this place already. A pointed ache numbed his shoulders. He tried to lift his hands to discover he couldn’t. His hands were tied behind him, to the upright pole grazing his spine. He tugged, but the pole had to be a foot thick. It wasn’t going anywhere and neither was he.

Then the murmurs soaked into his broken thoughts.

The bronze were here. A lot of them. All of them, maybe. A sea of tarnished bronzes, golds and greens around a staging area, he was currently fixed on. He hoped to the gods he was still high and this wasn’t real. What was it his mother had said? The coupling was a sexual celebration?

Lysander didn’t feel much like celebrating.

But he’d had a day left. Or a few hours, at least. Mirann, the bitch, had knocked him out. His jaw still stung where her ringed knuckles had stuck. Well, wasn’t this just perfect.

He pulled on the chains and strained forward, trying to break a link or two. The pole groaned, his muscles screamed, but the chains held. Gasping, he fell back. And now his audience had noticed him. They admired him with golden, hungry eyes. Just a few near the stage. Lowers, he figured, from their scant attire. Lysander noticed he’d been dressed in a thin lamé vest, a low-slung belt barely clinging to his hips, and leather chaps, and felt a laugh trying to claw its way up his throat. He grinned, making sure to show some teeth, and watched the lowers’ gazes darken with lust.

Fucking wonderful. He was the main attraction. If he couldn’t fight his way out, then better to get it done and over with. Where in the hells was Mirann? Maybe she wouldn’t show and the whole thing would be called off, though he doubted it. He’d never been that lucky.

The minutes dragged. The crowd swelled, and heat beat down in waves until finally Dokul and his naked daughter climbed the steps onto the stage. The chief wore a crown of forged iron and shimmering ceremonial armor. He’d thought amethyst had enjoyed the dramatic, but these bronze were pretty, self-centered fools. He fought the laughter back into its box. No use

in getting his throat cut for lacking respect. Though he was sure he'd be dead soon enough anyway.

Mirann draped her gaze over Lysander. Gold paint swept around her thighs, up her waist and circled over plump breasts. In his drugged stupor, he'd had his mouth on most of those parts during the last few weeks. But he wasn't drugged now, and her curves did little to rouse him.

"Today marks the union of two great lines," Dokul began, silencing his horde. "But also sends a message." The chief turned toward Lysander and not for the first time, desire blazed hot in his eyes. For a moment, Lysander stilled. He'd seen that look a long time ago when Lysander had told him no. Dokul hated to be defied, to be told he couldn't have something he wanted. He'd tried to take Lysander by force then, and now had the perfect opportunity to make it happen where all the bronze could see how amethyst bent over for them.

Lysander worked to his feet and ran his tongue over his top lip. Dokul's eyes flared.

You can't have me, asshole, Lysander mouthed.

"Weakness will not be tolerated!" Dokul boomed over the crowd.

"Weakness?" Now Lysander did laugh. "I wasn't the one groveling at the bitch-queen's feet for scraps at her table."

Fury flashed across Dokul. He thundered across the stage. "Watch your tongue, *prince*, or I'll rip it out."

"Fuck. You."

Dokul fell on him, trapping Lysander against the pole so it dug into his back. The male's thick chest and heavy armor scratched through Lysander's clothes. It had been like this before. The male's body too big, too heavy, a grappling of hands as Lysander had fought him off. He'd been younger then, and he'd still managed to best the bastard. But he hadn't been tied. And he hadn't been buried among bronze-kind with no escape.

Trying not to pant out his fears only made his breaths come harder. Lysander brought his gaze up and looked the ancient dragon in the eyes, looked into his soul. "You want me?" he whispered. "You can't have me. Or will you steal me away like you did the elf? Remember him?" Lysander pushed in and whispered against the male's whiskered cheek. "I killed your ill-fated flight that night and set the elf free."

Dokul shuddered, forcing out a sigh. Lysander smelled the male's spicy lust. Refraining from taking him was taking every ounce of strength the

bronze had in him.

“Take me here,” Lysander whispered. “Undermine your daughter and she’ll shred you in your sleep.” He could see Mirann over her father’s shoulder and by the fire in her eyes, knew she’d make her father pay if he stole this moment from her.

Dokul caught Lysander’s jaw and squeezed. “Survive this and you’ll have to survive me.”

Lysander smiled around the pinch of the male’s fingers. Dokul wanted him. He wanted him so badly he’d do almost anything to have him. Lysander was his weakness just the same as Dokul had assumed Lysander was Akiem’s weakness. A weakness Lysander knew how to exploit.

The bronze chief tore his hand free, leaving Lysander’s face stinging, and stomped off the stage. He caught one of the nearest males and pulled him close. Whatever he said, the male flicked his gaze to Lysander. Plotting, perhaps. Lysander was beyond caring. They wanted a show. He was going to give them one.

“Untie me,” he snapped at Mirann, forgetting the crowd as anger sizzled through his veins. “I’m not your pet.”

“Aren’t you?” She crossed the stage, skin shimmering, nipples pert, that little V between her legs already slick. “You act like one.” She stroked his cheek, pulled at his lips, and with her other hand, dragged her nails up his crotch.

She leaned too close, and he snapped his teeth together in warning, feeling the shift stretch through his skin.

“Are you going to kill me, Lysander, like you did your mother?”

He yanked on the chains, biceps straining. “Free me and find out.”

“Is that how you planned this would go? You’re not weak like you led your brood to believe. Nothing weak could kill the queen.” Her nails scratched down him again, making his balls tighten. The pain felt good, felt clean. It stoked his anger, and the anger chased away all the nonsense witterings in his head. This bitch pulled on his strings and knew exactly what she was doing, his cock responding to the desire to fuck or kill, or both.

She knew it too. She *wanted* it.

“Break the chains.” Her hand squeezed him and her eyes flashed. “I can’t, but you can.”

The restless building, aching, burning writhed beneath his skin, power crackling and coming alive. The last time he'd felt this rage, he'd let the dragon pour into his skin, but not here, he couldn't here. He'd shape it differently and use it.

The chains bit into his wrists, skin tearing.

Mirann sauntered backward, hips swaying. "Or will the little amethyst prince fail again?"

He'd kill her, then eat her, bones and all. He hadn't come here to be treated like a toy. He was a gods-be-damned amethyst, finest warrior in all the queen's flights. He'd survived it all, and she was not beating him now for some mockery of a ceremony. Lysander funneled the raw fury where it was needed, through his arms. He pulled on the chains until his body burned and trembled from the exertion. Metal snapped. Chain links flew. He lunged, caught Mirann's throat, and squeezed. Her quick hand dropped to his cock, striking lust alight and setting the madness ablaze. And it was a madness, he realized, because nothing in his head made any sense.

The hollowness swelled, eating him whole, only now it wasn't a hollow thing anymore, but pure ravenous, power. Mirann's lashes fluttered, her eyes closing. Her hand loosened. He could kill her. The beast in him wanted it, wanted to tear this whole place down and go on destroying. The fire in him burned so high it blinded and became an all-consuming force. There were no thoughts now, just heat and rage.

He threw her against the pole, clutched around her waist when she almost fell and dropped his hands to her hips, and then he was inside her, his cock a raging, thumping, heated thing. Hate. Gods, so much hate. It stoked him alive, turned him inside out and made him wild and free. Mirann panted. Screamed. Sinking his fingers into her back, he fucked her deep, fucked her until he'd lost his mind in her, until she screamed his name, and then he locked his hands around her neck and pumped, driving into her, riding the wave of pleasure, hating her, hating what this was, what it took from him, until he felt the tightness swell and pleasure twist into a maddening, devastating point. She clawed at his arm, trying to reach back, to fight free, and it only made him rage more. They thought him weak, thought him a failure. If he killed her here, they wouldn't think that anymore... gods, he lusted to kill her. Pleasure snapped up his spine, dumping out all reason. He thrust, briefly lost to the fire, to the light. His seed burst, hot and free, freeing ripples down his back and pooling them

beneath his balls until slowly, finally, he came down from the madness to find Mirann slick and limp between him and the beam. He jerked his hands free of her neck and for a few terrible silent seconds he thought he'd killed her.

She gasped, coughed, and clutched ahold of the pole like it was the only thing keeping her alive.

Don't...

Lysander's thoughts cascaded.

Don't think...

Could have killed her.

Wanted to...

He looked at his hands, felt the buzz of sex shiver off him, and slid his softening dick free. This wasn't who he was. He felt exposed, disgraced, like he'd sold some part of him for nothing.

Mirann was moving, staggering. Blood wept from scratches on her legs and back. He couldn't even remember touching her there.

She swept her hand between her legs and lifted it, dripping with cum, to the whooping crowd. Half of them were too busy succumbing to their own rabid desires to give a shit about the entertainment on the stage or to notice how Lysander staggered. Mirann licked the creamy seed off her hand and turned on Lysander. She kissed him, long and slow, holding him up so he couldn't collapse in front of them all. He tasted his seed on her tongue and nipped at her lip, deliberately drawing blood, mixing the two, falling into the horrible sense of wrongness.

When she drew back, her eyes glowed. She whispered, "Now, prince, you're ours."

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CHAPTER 35



E_{roan}

EROAN SLIPPED through the bronze lines like thread through the eye of a needle. Torchlights haloed the watchtowers, marking where to avoid, and with a quick scrabble over the palisade walls and through an array of steel spikes, he was through. Getting back in would be much, much harder.

He crouched at the clifftop edge to minimize his silhouette and leaned forward to peer into the muted dark. The wind breezed through his hair, cooling his face. Three hundred feet below, foaming breakers crashed against jagged rocks. And that was where he needed to be. Ahead of him, the horizon disappeared in the gloom of an inky black ocean. He'd have preferred a moonlit night, but he hadn't fully expected to leave so soon. And alone. But he was here now. There was no turning back.

Shifting the bundle of teeth over his shoulder, he threw a leg over the cliff's edge, tested his footing in a ridge, and began the long climb down. Salt dried the frigid air, cracking his lips and tightening his throat. The waves crashed and rumbled like snarling, hungry beasts waiting to swallow him should he fall. This was simple, like climbing through the tree canopy. Nothing he couldn't handle. Just one well-placed grip at a time.

The wind teased through loose locks of hair, tickling them against his cheek as though whispering for him to let go, to fall. He dug his fingers harder into the stones and dirt and kept on climbing. Dragon calls peppered

the quiet, their screeches piercing and sudden, but distant. They wouldn't see him, not plastered against the rocks. Closer to the foot of the cliffs, the sound of the waves drowned out their calls, though he still caught their sweeping silhouettes against the twilight sky.

He preferred the forests. The cliffs provided little cover, just a few gorse bushes clinging to vertical slits in the rocks. Finally, arms and legs aching, he reached the beach, adjusted the bundle of teeth and sword again, and made his way over fallen boulders, farther down the narrow strip of beach.

Debris barred much of the way. Tangles of wire and great chunks of rusted metals. Strange mangled wreckage from human machines, so rusted they didn't resemble anything. The remains seemed bigger out here, exposed on the rocks, unlike the buried monoliths dotted about the forest floor, but the strange, twisted monuments offered good cover.

Resting on a rock, he scanned the horizon. Flickers of light occasionally flashed far out to sea. He'd heard the straights were twenty miles from coast to coast. Messengers had once boated across. But none had come in decades.

He eyed those distant winking lights. They seemed closer than twenty miles. Human vessels perhaps?

If he paced himself and followed those lights, he could make it by morning.

A dragon's roar shook the air, so loud Eroan pressed his hands to his ears and ducked himself into a tiny crevice, tucking himself in tight. Rocks and pebbles bounced with each footfall. Closer, it came. The snout came first; an enormous whiskered nose cut with a grinning line of sharp teeth, bigger versions of the ones he had strapped to his back. Its eyes were narrowed as though it had something in its sights. It prowled by him, green scales so close Eroan could almost reach out and run his hand along them. The saltwater and seaweed likely masked his scent, and even if the dragon had smelled him, he'd mistake it for pine. Although, Eroan couldn't hide his thudding heart. Hopefully, the sound of the waves did that.

The beast was huge, with a proud, fully-developed crown and towering back ridges. Higher on its back, where the scales were table-sized, color shimmered like the inside of a seashell. The one's colors suggested jeweled. Not a bronze, and a long way from the tower. Then they truly were all stirred up after the queen's death.

Eroan waited a while for its tail to slither out of sight and the rumbling breathing growls to fade before leaning out of his hiding nook. The beast could have been curled among the rocks, waiting. He wouldn't have seen it until he was almost upon it. The crashing waves and how the sound echoed about him made the beach a dangerous place indeed.

Shifting the bundle higher and checking his sword, he started down the beach and paused, glancing back to the cliff face where a curtain of vines and weeds rippled in the wind. Almost completely hidden, the cave-mouth gaped. At high tide, it would disappear altogether. A way in and likely where the dragon had come from. He'd be a suicidal fool to venture inside. If the dragons didn't find him, the tide would flood him out. Still, he marked its location in his mind as a possible access point and made his way down to where the breakers slammed in, splashing the air and him with salted water.

An entrance like that, right into the heart of the warren? If he could reach the humans, expose the entrance... Frigid water lapped around his knees and then withdrew, trying to drag him out.

A blast of warm, wet air hit him from behind. He froze, ears pricked, only now picking up the sound of a thudding heart.

The lights out at sea winked, mocking. *So close...*

The wind turned, brought in by the waves now shoving at his thighs, and with it, came the overpowering stench of dragon.

It was behind him. So close his skin prickled. If he turned, he'd see only his fate looking back at him with eyes of fire.

Eroan bolted. He made it three strides before the foot came down, slamming him under the water. He gasped, drawing water down his throat, and grabbed for the rocks, for anything to hold on to. A wave struck him, or maybe a foot. His head cracked against rock. He gasped again, pulling more water into his lungs. Then the weight was gone from his back. Spluttering, he broke the surface, twisted and saw it, its huge face inches from his. Its golden eyes studied him, slitted pupils swelling as though they alone could draw him in. They were large enough to. A bronze. Bigger than the jeweled, with scales like polished disks.

A wave hit Eroan in the back, shoving him closer toward the rows of teeth. His thoughts scrabbled for escape. If he could somehow find deep water, he could get away, but the pool he stood in was inches. Enough to drown in but not enough to hide in. And still, the dragon watched him.

It reared up, puffing its chest, and cocked its head quizzically.

Run!

He pushed his boots into the silt and shoved backward, hoping to fall away, but the waves shoved at him again, driving him closer, and the movement seemed to spark delight in the dragon's eyes, widening them farther. Its jaw dropped open, teeth sparkling, and Eroan saw the view of its gullet, the same view Nylena must have seen in her final moments.

A rogue wave breached the boulders and poured in from the side, its sudden power slamming into the bronze, tearing it clean off its feet.

Eroan blinked.

Not a wave.

Another dragon. It locked its jaws around the bronze's neck and dragged it, thrashing and groaning up the beach, away from Eroan.

The bronze screeched, jolting Eroan into a run. He didn't stop, didn't look back. Just ran, sinking into deeper water until the waves crashed over him and dragged him away from the sounds of snapping jaws and wounded howls.

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CHAPTER 36



Lysander

LYSANDER PINNED Mirann under his claws, trapping her neck between his teeth. He was a twitch away from breaking her. She whimpered like a scolded kit, and some forgotten instinct in him pulled him back from the edge of that rabid violence. The second he let off, Mirann snapped her jaws inches from his nose, but she wasn't rising, and when he withdrew, her scales rattled low against her head and neck, signaling bitter defeat. It briefly occurred to him that her submission seemed too easy, but his thoughts drifted from her and back out to sea, searching for a streak of white hair among the surf. Snuffling, he caught the slightest scent of forest. But that was impossible. Everything here smelled of salt and rot. A tiny flicker of a memory brought to mind the elf, but it couldn't have been Eroan. Not here. The elf was dead.

Mirann shifted, trying to roll and cover her vulnerable belly. He swung his head back and rippled a snarl across his lips, warning her to stay down. She opened her jaws, panting. He lifted one great foot and spread his claws on her chest, holding her still, feeling an unfamiliar thrill at pinning one of his own. He'd rarely had the strength to best any of the amethyst, but things were different now.

Mirann averted her eyes, another sign of her submissive stance and Lysander's lips pulled back, drawing her scent through his teeth and over

his tongue.

He'd asked her for somewhere to shift right after the coupling, before he tore his own skin off, and she'd brought him down here, among the surf. The last thing he'd expected to find was an elf. Or maybe that had been wishful thinking among the madness still clawing at his thoughts.

He lifted his head to admire the swirling flights overhead. Mirann bumped her head against his neck and purred. Disgusted, it was all he could do not to cover her snout with a foot and push her away. But at least he had her under him now. And soon, if he played it right, he'd have Dokul under him too. It had cost him much. Too much of his mind, too much of his soul and most of his body, but then, what else was left? His life was surviving. It always had been. And now he knew how to survive these beasts too.

He let the fire churn low in his throat, tasting acid and nursing it into flame. Spreading his one good wing, keeping the broken one pulled close, he let the fire build, let it bubble and spit, and then roared it out, sweeping flame across the rocks, turning water to steam. Light flooded the beach and blasted farther out to see where Lysander gazed now.

If it had been Eroan, then maybe the stubborn elf had finally learned to run away from death instead of toward it.

He turned and plodded back into the cave, each step on firmer ground, but leaving his heart behind in the surf with the last dregs of hope that he might one day be free.

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CHAPTER 37



Eroan

“FOUND HIM... WASHED UP...”

“Get... warm.”

“...scars...”

Humans had round faces, big eyes, and stubby ears. Eroan had never seen a real one outside of sketches—the severe-looking dragon kind didn’t count. Humans seemed so soft, almost alien.

The female who’d been given the task of watching him poked at a fire, sending hot sparks up the chimney. Her cropped hair stroked her jacket-covered shoulders. Eroan shifted uneasily beneath the bedsheet, realizing he was virtually naked but for a slip of underwear. His clothes on a window seat, dried and folded, along with the opened bundle of dragon teeth.

She said something in a language he didn’t understand, her accent smooth and lilting. But her smile was friendly. He understood that.

“You’re awake.” This time she spoke in a language like his own. “And you’ve stopped shivering, *quelle folie!*” She tucked her thumbs into her trouser pockets and shook her head. He wasn’t sure of the meaning to her strange words, but it sounded as though he’d just been fondly chastised.

Her eyes weren’t unlike elven eyes, a little rounder, and their colors more of a muddle of hazel and green than an elf’s intense eye colors. She didn’t seem very old, but he wasn’t entirely sure how humans aged. Had

she been an elf, he might have assumed she was his age, but humans sometimes aged faster... at least, he recalled they did from his early teachings, but he hadn't paid much attention back then.

He shuffled backward and sat up, noting how her gaze began to flick from his face to his chest. She probably hadn't seen man elves before either. "May I have my clothes?"

She collected the pile and set it on the bed, then stuck out her hand.

He took her hand in his, found it warm and soft, if a little small, and gently gave it a shake in greeting. "*Je m'appelle* Chloe," she said.

"Eroan Ilanea."

Her smile grew. "When you're ready, Eroan, join us outside."

After she'd left, he quickly dressed and rewrapped the bundle of teeth, but there was no sign of his sword. It could have fallen off during the swim, or the humans had taken it. He couldn't recall much of anything after the first few hours in the water. He'd drifted, the current had taken him off course, then the cold had set in. The last thing he remembered was a string of lights getting closer. He likely owed these people his life.

Gathering his hair in a long tail, he knotted it around his knuckles and tied it into a loose bun, touching the earring high in his left ear before lowering his hands. He'd made it this far. The rest should be easier.

The human dwelling was made of thick stone walls and windows set into those deep walls. The straight walls, set at right-angles, reminded him a little of the tower rooms, only warmer, softer and smaller. Drapes fluttered behind an open window. Outside, maize swayed in far-reaching rolling fields. He couldn't hear the ocean, just the squawk of birds. They must have brought him inland. No trees, bar one spindly looking thing that was barely any taller than him.

The wide-open space beckoned.

He was here for a reason. He could do this.

Venturing outside, he followed the line of dwellings lining a road, toward a small gathering of people. They seemed to be focused on some kind of wheeled-vehicle. Its hatch was open, and two of the humans leaned inside the machine like they might be eaten by it.

Chloe was among the group. She waved him over.

They spoke their language quickly, rattling it off so the words blurred into one long string. He waited, listened, and watched. The machine they were huddled around appeared to be able to carry five grown people. Its

wheels, although chunky, wouldn't get far in his forests, but out here, on the flat plains, they could likely travel many miles in a day. Flat, black glass panels covered the roof. He'd thought them armor at first, but up close they looked too fragile to stop much of anything. He touched one and found it warm.

"Solar panels," Chloe said.

He blinked at her, unfamiliar with the words.

"It takes the light from the sun and converts it into power."

Alumn! He pulled his hand back. The *solar panels* fed off light, like he did?! "Are they magic?"

She laughed softly. "No, but I suppose it might seem that way."

But humans didn't have magic. At least, they hadn't in the past. They were, however, ingenious. The reason why he was here. "I need to speak with your elder."

"Of course, right this way."

More machines lined the road. Some bigger, some more armored, all likely had a different purpose. People watched him, nodding when he caught their gazes. They weren't so different from him. Some were shorter, some rounder, some darker, but elves varied too. And the people here were all younger men and women. Hard lives took the old and young too soon. Eroan knew that all too well.

He entered a long, single-story building, likely used for storing the grain but was now for storing guns. Stacks of them. It was often said that when the humans fled, they left behind metal and guns. Everything else, nature reclaimed.

Beyond the stacks, an enormous sheet hung half over what appeared to be an unfinished cage. It had to be as big as the largest Order houses. Large enough to accommodate a small dragon.

"Unfortunately, producing bullets is slow," Chloe was saying, walking him right by the cage. "And we've run out of the necessary components. Plus, guns never did work against them, not effectively."

Eroan stopped and peered up the long, narrow spaced bars. "Have you ever caught one?"

"We tried." She regarded the cage. "But we can't contain them for long. They shift, always finding a way out of our restraints. But this cage—" she grabbed a bar and gave it a testing tug "—once finished, should solve that."

Their cage had narrow, closely welded bars. A fully grown dragonkin could not slip through them, not even wearing its human skin. He tried not to gawk like an outsider and instead kept his gaze measured, like all of this was routine, when inside hope and delight sent his thoughts reeling. Elves could never have built such a thing, not on such a huge scale. “Where am I exactly?”

“Outside what used to be called *Le Touquet*.” She saw the name meant little to him and added, “Northern French coast. One of few remaining strongholds. A brood of dragons took the Paris ruins when I was small. They’ve been spreading outward ever since. They don’t bother us so much as the bronze across the channel. I assume you came from there?”

“I did.”

“How did you get through their barricades?” she asked.

“Getting out is easier than getting in.”

She studied him, likely wondering how he’d survived the crossing. Eroan bowed his head slightly. “Thank you, for saving me,” he added.

“You were lucky.” She left the cage and beckoned him along behind her toward a closed door. “A few weeks later and the ocean temperature drops considerably. You would not have survived long in the water.” She knocked on the door. A deep voice barked *Enter!* and she pushed into a room full of maps. The walls were papered in them and the table strewn with the largest, a flattened map of the world.

A man got to his feet and beamed at Chloe. They exchanged quick words in French, then Chloe gestured at Eroan. “The elf we found on the beach.”

“*Oui, oui!* You recovered quickly.” The man grinned, crinkling his tanned face. His hair had faded to silver in places, the same as his peppered chin. He had eyes the same as Chloe’s hazel ones.

“I am in your debt.”

The man clapped his hands together and exclaimed, “*Ça alors!* It’s been so long. We assumed you had all been killed, *je suis profondément désolé.*”

More French fell from the man’s lips, and all Eroan could do was smile at the man’s glee. “We believed the same of humans, but you are clearly thriving and inventing traveling machines.”

“Thriving? Hm, not so much. And the cars, well... we have adapted some, but they’re prone to faults and parts are scarce. We’ve all but scavenged anything of use within two hundred miles.” He ventured around

the table and tapped the large world map. “For all we know, Europe is all but desolate. The far east may have held on, but anything on either side of the Atlantic suffered the most. We have not heard from the Americas in decades now. They would send messengers across the seas, but their ships stopped coming when I was a boy, so that should tell you how long they’ve been silent.”

Eroan scanned the map. The epicenter of the rising was marked high up in the center, just below the continent he knew as simply the Whitelands. And from there, the dragons had spread like an infection. He brushed his fingers over the dark stain. Similar dark blooms swelled all over, making the map appear as though it were rotting. His ancestors would have wept at this sight. It had been their responsibility to hold back the rising. Eroan felt the urge to apologize for the failure of his people. He swallowed the words. “I did not know...” he said instead. “I haven’t seen it drawn like this before.” The map painted a stark picture of a world lost to dragons. To see it laid out so clearly, it made the reality of his missions all the more daunting.

“I imagine not.” The man offered his hand beside him. “I’m Gabriel... Gabe.”

“Eroan Ilanea.”

Gabe gripped Eroan’s hand tight and clung on. “Are there any of your elders left?” he asked softly.

“Some. But we are scattered and small in number.”

The man cupped Eroan’s hand in both of his and squeezed. “That, in itself, is a miracle. I promised myself if I ever saw an elf again, I would apologize for the sins of our past. It should never have happened.”

Eroan didn’t feel qualified to ease this man’s guilt. The events of the past were more myth than memory now. As far as he could recall from his childhood tales, both humans and elves had made mistakes. “It was a long time ago. I’m here to forge a new alliance.” He gently pulled his hand free and set the bundle of teeth down onto the table, untying the straps so the teeth spilled out. “I recently learned of a weakness we can all exploit. It’s why I’m here.”

He told Gabriel and Chloe all he knew of the dragon’s teeth, including a slimmed version of how he’d come to realize how the teeth could penetrate dragonscales, but also how they might be weaponized with the help of the humans’ huge machines.

More humans joined the meeting. Some clearly warriors from their lightly armored clothing and hard eyes. And Eroan answered their questions until the shadows outside had turned to night. The meeting moved from the map room to another building where a handful of families gathered to feast. More questions came his way, but also tales of how the humans had lived, how they had fought back by scavenging the remains of their old-world and created armored ships. Even the armor they wore, small steel plates over a black mesh-like fabric, specifically repelled dragon-fire, was an ingenious invention. They shared it all, so eager to bring him into their fold. The news was not as grim as he had feared. Humans were still alive, and they were fighting. Their enthusiasm warmed his blood and hope swelled in his chest. He had done the right thing by coming to them.

“Tomorrow,” Chloe said. She leaned against the wall beside a generous fireplace, lit by the fire-dancing flames. “There’s a team going to the nearest dragon pit to dig up their teeth and we’ll put this idea of yours to the test.”

He stood beside her, soaking up the warmth while watching the people. “I could show you if I hadn’t lost my sword—”

“We have it,” she said. “We weren’t sure whether to let you keep it, but it’s safe. You’ll get it back when you leave.”

Unease slithered beneath his skin. “I would prefer to have it with me.”

“I’m sure you would,” she laughed lightly. “But there are many here who feel safer with you unarmed.”

“You don’t trust me?”

Her friendly smile lost some of its softness. “It would be foolish of us to trust a stranger washed up on the beach.”

“Elves are honorable...” He left the sentence hanging, and by Chloe’s arched eyebrow, she had caught what he left unsaid.

“Yes, well... You’ve also been living among dragonkind for a very long time. I’m not suggesting you’re anything but honorable, just that we don’t know you or where that honor lies.”

“Are you suggesting elvenkind might have formed an alliance with dragons?” It was enough to make his blood boil, though he kept any emotion from his face. To insinuate such a thing was a grave insult.

Another shrug. “We’ve all done things we thought we’d never do to survive. I’m sure elves are no different.”

He studied the gathered people instead of letting her see anything unguarded on his face. "If I were so untrustworthy why would I risk my life to bring you this information?" He felt the sneer lift his lip and let it. Perhaps these humans needed a reminder of who it was they were dealing with.

"Why indeed?" Her smile softened, and he wondered if her human senses warned her that she was treading on thin ice. "Don't take it personally. We just... we have to be careful. There aren't many of us left. You would be no less suspicious of a human suddenly appearing in your camp."

That was true, considering what he knew of humans, but he had come for an alliance, and he wasn't about to let his pride ruin it. "I'd like to go with you tomorrow." He would get a feel for their warriors and what they were made of, and perhaps they would learn to trust him some more.

She nodded. "I'll ask Gabe. I'm sure he'll agree."

Good. This felt like progress, despite a few cultural frictions.

"How *did* you get through the bronze line?"

"Carefully." Eroan smiled. "I almost didn't. A bronze saw me on their beach. It toyed with me, would have killed me had another not attacked it."

"They fought? You saw it?"

He nodded, recalling the beast's face inches from his. "I escaped while they were distracted."

She chuckled. "Then luck is certainly on your side, Eroan. Let's hope you are a good omen. We're sorely in need of one."

Eroan felt his smile grow and the tension ease. The beach attack had been close. He would have been eaten if the emerald hadn't fought off the bronze. It had been wounded too, he recalled now. Instead of stretching its wings, it had tucked one in close. The bronze likely tore into it. His thoughts wandered to another dragon, his wing also damaged, and the last time he had seen him, tumbling through the skies, locked in combat with the black dragon, Akiem... Thinking of Lysander wasn't going to help him now, and yet he couldn't seem to be rid of the prince's memory for long. It stalked him often. He'd dreamed of those green eyes before waking here.

"How *do* you plan to return to your village?" she asked quietly, pulling Eroan's thoughts back. Before he could answer, she'd already seen the reply on his face. "You didn't plan on returning, did you? This is a one-way trip."

Until it is done.

He had told himself he'd return. He'd said the words to Seraph, but it had been a lie. There was no place for him among the Order, and after everything he'd admitted to Curan, there was no going back. Ever.

Chloe chewed on her lip and sighed. "You're a brave man—a brave elf. Are all your kind like you?"

"I used to think so." Now he hoped they weren't. Bravery led to foolishness, and there weren't enough elves left for their lives to be carelessly tossed away.

"Perhaps, if this works, I'll meet more elves one day. Gabe used to tell me stories when I was little of how the elves were a kind and caring people. *Hidden guardians*, he called them. He admires you, I think. Like you're a mythical creature come to life. He sees you as a new hope. If you can survive, then so can we."

Pride and warmth swelled in his chest. "We've sacrificed much of our kindness to protect ourselves, but it's still there, hidden. I would like for you to meet more elves too." It was unlikely in their lifetime unless the bronze wall fell, but he could hope. After all, blind hope had gotten him this far.

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CHAPTER 38



Lysander

LYSANDER COULDN'T REMEMBER the name of the bronze in his bed. He wasn't even sure if he'd been told it, they'd barely said three words. The lower had appeared outside his room with a bring-it look in his shining eyes. Mirann had likely sent him as *fodder* and Lysander had been in no mood to turn him away. Things escalated from there and for a few blissful hours, he'd lost himself in the feel of the male's mouth taking him on deep. The freedom of not pretending, that was all he'd wanted, and the nameless bronze had given it to him. Or rather, Lysander had given *it* to the lower. Repeatedly.

Mirann had sent the lower as thanks for not forcing her hand in killing him, or for him not killing her. He wasn't entirely sure, but this gift would probably come with caveats. Lysander was too far gone to care. Fucking a nameless bronze emptied out all the messed-up shit in his head and that was enough. He could return to being the prince afterward. Here, with a lower, without his mother watching, without the entire dragon brood judging, the freedom he fell into finally made the hell he'd endured the last few weeks almost worth it.

He had quickly discovered the bronze had a piercing where his cock met his balls and had spent a great deal of time investigating it with his tongue, delighting in how the bronze groaned. After that, he'd flipped the

male over and rimmed his spread ass with a wet finger, and for the first time in forever, he didn't feel that ugly, vicious shame of being wrong or different or a failure. Or the pressure of having to spill his seed in a female just because the bitch-queen needed to sell her numbers. Thinking of her sent him into a frenzy, and while the bronze panted beneath him, Lysander fucked the hate and pain away.

He rather liked Mirann's gift, he considered now, with the male sprawled beside him.

The lower stirred, finally waking. He lifted his shaven head and tried to reach out, to draw Lysander's into a kiss. Lysander pulled free and shifted out from under the male's warm limbs, hoping to avoid the awkward morning after. By now, in the tower, he would have had to pay an amethyst male off for his silence, making the whole act feel dirty.

There was none of that here, and yet it still felt as though he was being tugged by someone else's string. Mirann's.

She would appear soon.

He swallowed and dragged a hand down his chin and around his neck. Thoughts from yesterday began to pile in. Thoughts of how he'd almost killed Mirann in full view of the bronze brood. Word would no doubt get back to his brother. That thought more than the others made the ugly hurt return with a vengeance. Would Akiem congratulate him or would he see Lysander as the enemy? *You're ours*, Mirann had said.

The bronze lower knelt behind him, pressed his knees on either side of Lysander's thighs, and brushed the silken softness of his hardened cock against Lysander's lower back. He purred and licked behind Lysander's jaw, at the sensitive spot below his ear, and tingling heat tightened Lysander's balls, reawakening lust.

This bronze—slimmer than most, which was probably why Mirann had picked him—was made of pure muscle. As dragon, he probably outsized Lysander, but the male's mind was a submissive and willing one. Lysander had explored much of the male's impressive design with his tongue, losing his fucking mind to the salty thrill of it. He was having a hard time thinking past it now.

The male rubbed against Lysander in an easy, rocking motion, and reached around the prince's waist to capture his straining erection. Fuck it. Lysander lay back, let the male thrust into his back, and dropped his head against the lower's shoulder. The male's mouth was on his neck again, his

tongue swirling, and his hand pumped faster, lifting Lysander's lust higher and higher, making it crackle in all the right ways. He could feel the spooling, unraveling sensation, and shifted his hips, making the angle just right. Then the damn bronze was gone from his back but quickly dropped to his knees in front and between Lysander's thighs, his mouth and hand now working in a symphony.

Pleasure snagged somewhere inside. Lysander gasped and fell back onto his elbow so he could peer down himself at the bastard pinching his tip.

"Tease me at your own risk," he growled, low and deep, letting dragon slip through.

The bronze's mouth twitched. He parted his lips, pressed his tongue beneath Lysander's glistening head, and worked his fingers and thumb, pumping that pleasure higher all over again. Lysander kept him locked in his sights and watched his cock flush, felt the release coil low, gathering all the nerves into one sweet, tight ball that dumped him in mindless ecstasy the second the pressure broke, and his seed pumped onto the male's tongue. Once, twice more. Fucking diamonds, the bronze knew his way around a cock better than any amethyst he'd paid in the shadows.

The bronze pulled a few more times, tearing a curse from Lysander, then swallowed, his face flushed with glorious mischief. Lysander fell back and blinked at the ceiling. Yeah, he was going to have to pay Mirann for this.

He didn't hear the door open but smelled Mirann's metallic scent and heard her fingers snap together. The bronze hurried out, naked, sweat-soaked and erect.

"We weren't done," Lysander grumbled, propping himself on his elbows.

"You're done." She peered down her nose. "Get cleaned up. Your brother is here."

The afterglow fled, filling the pit of his stomach with dread. "He's here? What does he want?"

"To talk. Something about elves." She flicked a hand. "It's a ruse. He wants *you*. So let's show him you, shall we?"

Lysander stared at the closed door long after she'd left. The way she'd grinned chilled his blood. Anything the elves could do wouldn't have been enough for Akiem to leave the tower and visit the frontline, not at a time

when his rule was so fragile. She was right, his brother was full of shit. Akiem was scheming.



FAT, black clouds hung low in the skies over the lands behind the bronze palisades. The bronze flags still fluttered, only this time the wind had them pointing out to sea.

Lysander climbed the scaffold to the central watchtower and was met with Dokul's heated glare plus two other mute guards. The chief's tarnished armor was the battered and bruised kind, not the flimsy ceremonial garb he'd worn on the stage—the last time Lysander had seen him. In comparison, Lysander had thrown on something made of cotton, so he could at least breathe without clinking, and added an over-jacket. He couldn't bring himself to wear all their plates and chainmail. He wasn't built like a bronze. That armor just looked ridiculous on him. Dokul noted his lack of bronze attire with a grunt. "You look like something I'd chew up and spit out."

Nice. Lysander threw him a bright smile, and the male's lips twitched around a sneer that died on the way to his lips.

The bronze's threat sizzled in his memory. *Survive this and you have to survive me.* Lysander had spent most of the day mindlessly fucking the nameless bronze. Dokul knew where he'd been, of course. The chief likely knew everything that happened in the warren.

"You're ours now," Dokul said as Lysander took in the sight beyond the bronze line.

So you all keep saying...

Akiem had brought five flights, at least fifty dragonkin. Enough to turn this from a friendly chat into a clear threat. Lysander gripped the wall and scanned their numbers, recognizing many among them. They all wore their human masks—a strategic choice—and wore the typical amethyst plate armor, smooth and matte, so as not to reflect any light, but lightweight. Akiem could click his fingers, and that force would spill over the palisades in seconds. Had they been sprawled across the land as dragon, their numbers would have been a clear show of force. The bronze would have knee-jerked in response, but as human, they posed less of a visual threat.

The citrusy smell in the air reminded him of home, and he briefly wondered how he had found himself on the wrong side of a war he hadn't wanted. But it was done. Lysander was a traitor. And Akiem was here for him.

He spotted his brother among them, front and center of their loosely formed gathering.

"I will not give you up," Dokul declared.

Lysander arched an eyebrow at the chief and saw the male's broad cheek flutter as he regarded the amethyst force. Dokul would go to war on two fronts to keep him. Why? It had to be about more than the man's lust or his desire to have what he had been denied. Had Lysander's mother been the one bargaining with his life, he'd know why she didn't want to relinquish him. Breeding more amethyst. But Dokul hadn't mentioned offspring. Dokul didn't want Lysander because he was amethyst. There had to be another reason.

Movement among the amethyst drew Lysander's eye downward. Akiem strode forward. Behind him, four of his flight broke from the ranks, bringing with them two figures both tied at their wrists and dragged behind them like pets on a leash. Their pale skin, shapely eyes, and pointed ears were unmistakable. Elves. Lysander narrowed his eyes, sharpening his focus. Two females. Both wearing stubborn, blank looks, like all of this couldn't touch them. They should have been groveling and submissive. By diamonds, were they all as stupid and as stubborn as Eroan?

"Why does he bring elves to my door?" Dokul mused aloud. The big male gripped the wall, clenching it so tightly his caramel-skinned knuckles paled to a wheat color.

There was no reason to bring elves here, none that Lysander could imagine. He looked away, down the palisade walls and then above. Heavy cloud-cover hid the skies.

"Do you have flights in the air?" he asked.

Dokul turned his gaze on Lysander.

"Or are they all out patrolling the coast? Because if I were Akiem, I'd want all of your attention on the unnecessary elves and not on the skies if I were planning to steal back my traitorous brother."

Dokul nodded at a sentinel guard. "See to it immediately."

"Dokul!" Akiem called. The wind threw his familiar voice at them. "Must your king wait all day for an invite?"

“Or...” Lysander looked down. Akiem was close enough now for him to see his mildly amused expression. “...he could just be here to speak of elves and gloat about his new role as reigning monarch.” One of those options was a lot more likely than the other.

Dokul dropped a hand onto Lysander’s shoulder, knowing it would be seen by all. “There was a time these things were settled beneath teeth and claw.” Dokul kept his voice low so that only Lysander would hear. “I preferred those days.” He nodded at the waiting Akiem and spoke aloud, “Of course, you are welcome, *Prince Akiem*.”

His brother’s amused expression cracked and fell away.

“Open the gates,” Dokul told his guards. “Let him and his escorts in, but only them. Monitor those that remain. Any break from their ranks and I’m to be informed immediately.”

Lysander knew that any attack wouldn’t be as obvious as to come from the front. If Akiem had come here to fight, then there would be a force somewhere else, somewhere hidden. And the bronze would never see them coming.

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CHAPTER 39



The cavern carved from solid rock was easily large enough to accommodate half a dozen dragons in their true forms, but today, the vastness of space served to remind the amethyst how small they were inside Dokul's warren. At least, that's what Lysander assumed from reading his broods' quick glances and solid jaws. He knew all too well how an amethyst preferred to be above ground, not below it. The heat would be fucking with them too, although Akiem appeared immune, standing proud in his armor and cloak. His brother always had been immune to everything. Always above it and untouchable.

Lysander had to admit, Akiem looked like a king, even without a crown. A stern king. He had their mother's fierceness. Seeing him here, now, after they had both tried to claw each other to pieces, reminded Lysander of exactly why he'd killed her, and why he'd left, and why even this gods-awful place—with their twisted mind-fucks—was better than the tower. Akiem would have killed him. Still might.

The amethyst guards forced the elves to their knees on the polished stone floor. The right thing for those elves to do would be to drop their heads and act meek, so of course, they both knelt like they were about to be honored, not executed. The younger one had a fresh face with wide, emotive, darting eyes. The tip of her ear was missing. Had she been dragon, he would have assumed it had been bitten off, but elves didn't seem the sort to bite chunks out of each other. In truth, Lysander had no idea how elves lived. Maybe they were all vicious. Eroan had certainly been able to handle himself.

The older elf had a calmness about her, as though she had resigned herself to this and accepted what would happen with grace and honor. He saw some of Eroan's defiance and pride in them both. Not that it mattered, they'd be dead within the hour.

"Gifts?" Dokul asked. His rumbling voice echoed deep into the empty space around them.

"Of a sort," Akiem replied. "They have information." His gaze flicked to Lysander but he schooled his expression, keeping his thoughts far from his face.

Dokul took a long look at the elves, his smile growing with every passing second. "If you're hoping to trade them for Lysander, they had better shit iron. I have no use for them otherwise."

Akiem's jaw worked. "Lysander is an amethyst."

"You know he's not." This came from Mirann. She marched into the cavern, armored from her bronze boots to her shaped shoulder pauldrons and drew alongside Lysander. "Your mother's deal was binding. He is bronze now."

"My mother is dead." Another flutter in Akiem's jaw. "Any recent deals she made were rendered void upon her death."

"Prince Akiem," Dokul stepped forward. "You have no authority here. We will not be giving up Lysander, and so, if there is no other business—"

Akiem withdrew a sword from inside his cloak and threw it to the floor. It sang against the stone. "I found this on the younger elf."

Lysander knew that sword, knew every recurve, every nick in its blade, every notch in the handle. It was his. How in the hells had the elves gotten it? His heart thudded too loud. He scoured the elves' faces. The elder one hadn't reacted, but the younger one... She looked at that sword, her chest rising and falling too fast. She knew it too.

"My brother knows what this is," Akiem said. "And what it means."

All eyes turned to him, all but the young elf's.

"It's mine," he said.

The young elf jerked her head up and met Lysander's gaze, failing miserably at hiding her emotions, although he couldn't read them all. Fear, certainly. Intrigue too. He didn't understand why this sword would mean anything to her, why the fact he owned it seemed important.

"Who are you?" he asked her.

She bared her teeth, showing two tiny little canine teeth. Eroan had often bared his teeth in the same way. Of course, she didn't answer him. Gods, he could feel it happening again. What was it with him and stubborn elves and their stubborn silences? He wiped the smile off his lips before it had fully formed.

"Why did an elf have my sword?" he asked Akiem, splitting his glances between them.

"I was hoping you could tell us."

"I have no idea. The last time I saw my swords, they were in Elisandra's hands, right before I killed her. "

Akiem winced as Lysander had known he would, but his brother's discomfort paled as he thought back to that night in the queen's chamber. He'd dropped the swords by the bed right before he'd begun to seduce Eroan. She'd picked one up and pressed it to his neck, and then... Those blades would have been left in the rubble and ash, surely?

"You let elves into the tower?" he asked Akiem.

Akiem growled. "Don't insult me. Only one of us has let an elf live long enough to steal from you."

"That elf died."

"Clearly, it did not." Akiem gestured at the sword. "Unless you gave your swords to the elves? Did you? Are you in league with the elves, brother?"

"No... I..." Dokul and Mirann were observing all this, reading their own assumptions into it. "The elf died, Akiem. You were there. Your flames killed him."

Akiem huffed. "I saw you kill Mother, nothing else. It really doesn't matter. This sword is yours, and now the elves are disturbing our remains, digging up our dead and stealing our teeth."

"That has nothing to do with me—"

"He didn't die!" the young elf blurted. "He survived, he came back to us, and now we're going to kill you all!"

Akiem backhanded her from behind, sending her sprawling close to Dokul's boots. The bronze snatched a fist full of her hair and jerked her off the floor, so her legs kicked. She hissed and spat, snapping her teeth at the bronze. Dokul laughed and grinned at Lysander. "I like this one."

Lysander needed to know more. The sword being here was important. That elf was important. She knew Eroan... and impossibly, she said he

lived. His carefully guarded heart fractured and a splinter of pain cut into his chest. Eroan had survived. That damned fool of an elf had escaped that night and stolen Lysander's sword, maybe both of them. Did he wear the other blade? Lysander's mind ran free with the possibilities.

Mirann was watching this all unfold with too much fascination. Dokul, too, waited for Lysander's reaction, and Akiem knew Lysander could not let the young elf leave.

"What do you want?" Lysander asked Akiem.

"You."

"No," Dokul answered. "Ask again and you'll never leave this warren."

"If I do not return, my flight will rip through your defenses," Akiem replied.

"Our line has stood for hundreds of years."

"Yes." Akiem smiled. "Against forces attacking from the sea. Your internal defenses are weak. You've never needed to fight off a force from the north."

Dokul's chest broadened. "You'll never get inside the warren."

"We don't need to get in, we just need to limit your efficiency. The humans will do the rest."

Dokul's laugh turned dark. "Without our defenses, you're exposed."

"No, without your defenses, we're free to advance beyond the coast, to spread farther. We don't need you, Dokul. We never really did. The queen kept you here, kept you working away to keep you occupied on the humans, to give you bronze something shiny to distract you, so you didn't bother her."

Dokul dropped the elf and squared up to Akiem, dwarfing him in bulk. "You need to withdraw, or I'll take your pissy flight and tear them to pieces."

Akiem's guards reached for their weapons.

Mirann reached for hers.

"A new dawn rises and the age of the dragons will soon be over," The older elf said, her quiet voice cutting through the thick violence with scalpel precision. She looked at Lysander—looked through him, and in one sudden lunge, grabbed the blade off the floor, her wrists still bound together, and thrust sloppily toward Dokul. Mirann was between them in a blink, her bronze dagger punched through the elf's chest, lifting her off her feet.

Lysander grabbed at Akiem's shirt and yanked his brother close. A swell of crackling magic darkened Akiem's aura. "Get out of here or they'll kill you and your flights. Go!" He shoved, hoping it would be enough to jolt his brother into action.

But it was already too late. The tension that had been building suddenly snapped. Akiem's human outline shuddered and sloughed off. A rush of power filled the space between them, sweeping Akiem up. His body split apart and scattered in a cloud of darkness, like stars, only for those pieces to find the edges of an enormous bulk and twist it, shape it, building dragon from the nothing space. Akiem's wings flung outward, blasting them all with a storm of dust, consuming everything from floor to cavernous ceiling, painting the space in black scales, and there stood Akiem in all his dragon-glory.

Lysander bolted, grabbed the young elf and ran. Deafening roars chased him down. The push and pull of air shifting briefly tripped him, then a second roar blasted and bronze wings burst open above like golden fireworks exploding.

Terrible sounds of claws raking on scales, of teeth snapping, broiled behind him. He didn't look, couldn't look, and ran for the doorway. The ground dropped, sending him and the elf sprawling. Rock tumbled, and one of the dragons screeched like the very earth was opening to swallow it. Lysander saw then. The bronze chief and his daughter—both enormous—had his brother against the cavern wall, pushed into the rock, shattering the wall and the ceiling above. More boulders collapsed. Teeth flashed. Then, as an orange glow burned through the clouds of dust, Lysander twisted, launched off his feet and sped from the room with the elf in tow.



LYSANDER BUNDLED the elf into his room, slammed the door closed, and flung himself against it as though he could hold back the inevitable. Whoever won that fight would come for the elf and him. What had his brother been thinking attacking the bronze in his warren?

The elf gingerly lowered herself to the edge of his bed and gripped the sheets as though hoping they could keep her safe. "By Alumn..." she

whispered, “by Alumn, by Alumn...” over and over, a prayer to her goddess.

If Lysander was in trouble, she was dragon feed.

“We don’t have long.” He crouched in front of her, hoping to make himself small and less threatening. She was a little thing, all long limbs and darting eyes, reminding him of a startled deer. He lifted a hand to sweep her bangs out of her eyes.

She sprang, turning into a screeching, tearing, clawing thing.

Lysander stumbled backward. Her teeth sank into his neck. Punches thumped his ribs, trying to pummel him into submission.

He tore her off and flung her down. “Gods damn it, elf. I just saved your life back there!”

“For your own uses!” she spat, scrabbling backward until she bumped against the bed.

He dabbed at his neck. “Don’t flatter yourself.” His fingers came away bloody. “I don’t do elves.” She was a fiery one, and with passion like that, he’d bet his scales she knew of Eroan. “Who gave you my sword?”

“I’m not telling you beasts anything!” She tucked her legs under her, turning her long limbs sprawl into a careful, wary crouch, ready to spring again at any second.

“That was *my* sword.” He clamped a hand over the bite to stem the flow. Bitten by an elf. By the great gods, what was next? “If you elves are so honorable, why did one of your kind steal it from me?”

“He didn’t steal it from you.” She stuck her chin out. “The person he got the sword from is dead.”

“No, that’s definitely not the case.” He gestured at himself. “Definitely not dead. You, however,” he pointed, “will be.”

She blinked those big, emotive eyes. “You’re not going to kill me after saving me.”

“You’ll live a lot longer if you don’t argue with elf-eating dragons.” Damn her. Of course he wasn’t going to kill her. She had a mind as sharp as her teeth. “It was Eroan, wasn’t it? The elf who gave you my sword?”

She shrugged, and even that little gesture was defiant. “I don’t know any Eroan.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Liar.”

“A dragon’s calling me a liar!” She laughed. Climbing to her feet, she frowned back at him. “Let me go and I’ll tell you.”

She had to be a whole two feet shorter than him, but for what she lacked in size, she made up for in pure rage, defiance, and stubbornness. So much so, when she started to stalk toward him, Lysander straightened and planted his feet, holding his ground.

“Let you go?” He brushed his bloody hand on his thigh and dabbed some more at his neck. The blood had clotted, at least.

She stopped outside his reach. Her constantly shifting gaze and tense stance suggested she’d bounce off the walls at any second or bite him again the first chance she got. “Get me outside and I’ll tell you everything.”

“You’ll tell me everything about Eroan? He truly lives?” He tried to hide the breathless hitch in his voice and failed. At least she couldn’t hear how his heart rattled.

“Maybe.” She shrugged a shoulder again.

Insolent, foolish elf. “I could torture it out of you.” He took a step closer. She wasn’t backing down. If anything, his threat had sparked more fire in her bright eyes.

“The others would,” she said, “but not you... I know who you are. Prince Lysander.”

He spat a laugh. “You’ve heard my name, so you think you know me? You, little elf—” he poked her in the chest, risking her wrath “—have no idea what I’m capable of.”

She pressed her lips together. “I know one thing, you saved an elf before, and you’ll do it again now.”

He knew one thing. Eroan was alive, for sure. He hadn’t expected it to mean so much, for his heart to soar when his wings could not. Just knowing Eroan hadn’t burned up on that bed cleared some of the fog that had been smothering his thoughts since that night.

If only he still had both his wings, he would take to the skies and find him, bronze and amethyst war be damned.

“Like I said,” the elf grinned, reading her victory on Lysander’s face, “let me go and I’ll tell you what you want to know.”



LYSANDER SCANNED THE BEACH. The tide had pulled back, revealing countless nooks for an elf to hide in. The thunderous sound of the waves hid

any sound they might make, but bringing her down here was still a risk.

She had fallen quiet. The shivering had started minutes ago. Shock, probably. If the bronze found her, she'd feel worse than those tremors and then nothing at all.

"You'll have to climb those cliffs," he said, lifting his voice over the crashing waves. He nodded at the vertical cliff face. "I can't do any more for you."

The faraway look in her eyes made him wonder if he was just delaying the inevitable. If she didn't stop shivering, she'd never make the climb. Eroan had taught him that elves were tough bastards and this one was tougher than she looked. She'd make it. But once at the top...

The skies churned with dragons. He had no idea if the fight still raged or if his brother had gotten away. When the chaos died down, her chances were slim.

"What's your name?" he asked, starting the climb over a chunk of rusted wreckage.

The elf looked at the twisted metal like she'd never seen human machines before, then started gingerly climbing after him. "Seraph."

He made it to the top of the wreckage and spotted a bronze half a mile down the beach. The dragon eyed the waters, not the skies. It was too far away to hear them and the salt water would mask their scent, but its eyesight was sharp, especially in low light. "We should stay here a while, see if it moves away."

Seraph gasped and almost lost her footing. Lysander snatched at her sleeve and yanked. She looked at his hand. Then, wide-eyed, looked up at him. Raw fear showed in the whites of her eyes. Where was her fire from earlier? And then, Lysander realized, she knew if the cliff didn't kill her, the bronze flights circling above would.

"You know Eroan?" he asked, distracting her. They both crouched low and huddled against the brisk, sea-soaked wind.

"Eroan is—was my t-teacher." Her teeth chattered. She pulled her arm from his grip and hugged them around herself.

"Was?" Was this the part when she told him Eroan really was dead? He couldn't take it if she did. That tiny flutter of hope would shrivel up and die, sitting like a kernel of poison inside. Strange, that he'd pin so much on an elf he barely knew, terrifying even, but he couldn't pretend he didn't feel.

"He left." She sniffed.

Not dead. Lysander sighed. “Why?”

“The Order kicked him out. He... He said some things to our leader.” She briskly rubbed her upper arms. The salted wind ruffled her hair and nipped at her cheeks, turning them pink.

So Eroan had gotten kicked out of the assassin club for his smart mouth. That sounded like Eroan, but even Lysander knew the Order wasn’t something an elf walked away from. It was Eroan’s life, his reason for breathing, the fire that had kept burning in the darkest of nights. Only now did Lysander realize what that kind of devotion might have felt like. “Must have been some words.”

“Yeah, well... He came back from killing the queen all wounded inside, but the others couldn’t see the scars,” her lips twisted. “We *thought* he killed the queen. Turns out, that was you.”

Lysander’s cheek twitched. He watched the bronze again, keeping the elf in the corner of his vision.

“He thought...” she went on. “He thought he’d failed so... I don’t know... I think he needed to do something to prove he deserved to be alive when all the others had died.”

Pride. When Lysander had first seen him, strung up by the wrists in the dark, pride had burned in his gaze. It was Eroan’s strength and his weakness.

“Where did he go?” he asked.

“He had the teeth and he said he’d...” she hesitated and bit her lower lip. “I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Akiem already did. Eroan figured out dragon teeth are effective at getting through scale.” Eroan had seen him stab Elisandra with the sword, it was the only way the elf could have known. And now he was alive, free, and making more swords to kill dragons with. It wasn’t a surprise, and Lysander should probably have felt more guilt for handing the elves a weapon, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Eroan was alive, and he was out there, still fighting, winning for his people.

“Where did he go?” he asked again. “After he was kicked out?”

“Here.”

“What?”

“To the bronze line. Then he was going to the humans.”

Lysander’s heart stuttered. The elf on the beach, the one he’d stopped Mirann from toying with. That couldn’t have been Eroan?

“What—what is it?” Seraph asked.

He sat back and switched his gaze over her shoulder and out at the gray seas. Eroan had been here, right under his nose? It didn’t seem possible. Then he remembered Eroan’s seemingly never-ending determination, his strength and how he’d survived for so long on will-power alone.

“He made it,” Lysander whispered.

Her lashes fluttered. “You know for sure?”

“I know he made it through this line and I doubt he’s the type to let an ocean stop him.”

“Alumn...” Seraph sighed as though breathing out a great weight. “Xena would have liked to have known...” The elf’s frown cut deeper, and her eyes took on a glassy sheen. “Xena was with me when they came...”

Lysander winced inside. She looked tough, and her bite was definitely worse than her bark, but this little elf was on borrowed time. Climbing the cliffs in daylight would expose her, but if she stayed on the beach until nightfall, the cold would finish her off. Her simple leather clothes were thin and ill-suited to weathering outside. If he let her go now, she was dragon bait. How could he leave her?

“You can’t do this.”

“What choice do I have?” A tear fell. She swiped the offensive little drop away.

If he let her go now, and she died, he’d never forgive himself. If he ever saw Eroan again, he wanted to tell him how he’d met an elf and how Seraph survived, not how he’d sent her to her death when he could have saved her. After everything Lysander had seen done to Eroan, after every lash of the whip he’d dealt him, the least he could do was try to save this elf’s life.

“I can protect you.”

She swallowed.

“It means going back inside and choosing a time to escape when you can get through the line. But this here... trying to climb the cliffs, it will get you killed.”

“You would help me?”

“I can’t guarantee they won’t hurt you, but I can keep you alive. I give you my word.”

“A dragon’s word? How can I trust you not to just hand me over?”

“That’s the odd thing about trust, you either do or you don’t.” He offered her his hand. “This won’t be easy, Seraph, but you’ll live, I promise

you. And I'll get you out when the time is right."

She looked at his hands and his face, searching for deceit. "Did you really save Eroan?"

He pulled his hand back. "I tried, but he's... difficult. He would never have left if I hadn't killed the queen, no matter the cost. He didn't fail. He killed others. He would have killed us all eventually."

She tucked a dancing lock of dark hair behind her pointed ear. "But not you?"

Lysander remembered how Eroan had lifted his head to the sun and smiled like everything was right with the world. He remembered too how he'd wanted to kiss his jaw and run that kiss along Eroan's sun-blushed lips. But that moment hadn't changed the past or the whip lashes Lysander had dealt him. Someone like Eroan wouldn't ever forget that. Lysander wouldn't blame the elf if he one day took his revenge.

"He needed me to get to Elisandra." And that was an ugly truth he hadn't let himself admit. Eroan was a dragon-killer, and Lysander had been an easy target. He'd fooled himself into making up some fantasy that could never be. "Once it was done, Eroan would have killed me." *And I'd have let him.*

"So, why are you helping me? Why are you different?" she asked.

He shrugged and dragged a smile out of nowhere. "I've no idea. If you figure it out, let me know, won't you." He offered his hand again. This time, she took it.



"DON'T FIGHT BACK, don't give them any reason to notice you. Be meek and obliging."

Seraph listened, her face paling. Lysander wasn't about to pretty this up for her. If she was anything like Eroan, she knew exactly what awaited her in a bronze warren. All he could hope was that he might save her from the worst of their *affections*.

Dokul's private receiving caverns were empty of dragons. He likely had them all out hunting down amethyst. And as the warren wasn't heaving with amethyst dragons, Lysander assumed Dokul had won the brawl. He'd soon know for sure.

“What do we do?” the young elf asked, absently eyeing the strange sculptures of twisted metal propped about the room.

“We wait.”

Hanging tapestries covered doorways leading to other, more private areas of Dokul’s chambers. Lysander had gone no farther than this room in the weeks he’d been in residence, and he had no wish to. He watched Seraph drift around, her dark clothes and little frame at odds with the enormity of this place. She reached out a hand to stroke some monstrosity of mangled wreckage.

“Don’t touch anything,” he snapped.

Seraph snatched her hand back. “What are these things?”

“Bits of the old-world. He likes to collect metal, anything that shines... it’s a bronze thing.” Collect it, wear it, some of them even ate the stuff. Lysander had tried not to think too hard on the bronze idiosyncrasies.

“How did you come to be here?” she asked him while eyeing the strange sculpture instead.

“My brother witnessed me kill Elisandra. He would never have let me live. I had no choice but to come here. It was that or go wild and...” he hesitated, “never mind, I was due to come here anyway.”

She looked him over from head to toe. “Can’t you go anywhere you want?”

He dropped into one of Dokul’s tall-backed chairs and smiled at the elf’s innocence. “You don’t know much about dragon hierarchy, do you?”

She looked as though she might sneer something, likely an insult, and then tore her gaze away and fixed it on the tall, ugly metal thing in front of her. “They taught us some... in the Order.”

“Tell me.” This should be interesting, and it would keep his mind off what was about to happen.

“You have lowers who hunt and provide daily services for those at the higher end of the pecking order.”

“Pecking order?”

“Oh, you know...” she waved a hand. “Like chickens.”

“What?” He bristled.

“Chickens.” She planted her hands on her hips and flapped her elbows. “Flightless birds.”

A smile tried to break out across Lysander’s lips. “I know what a chicken is, but I’m struggling to see why you would compare me to one.”

“Well, not... you, not a direct comparison. I mean,” she trailed off when his glower darkened. “Anyway, I suppose we don’t know much about dragons socially. What was your point?”

He’d forgotten he had a point and stared at the elf, concern fraying his nerves. The bronze were going to eat her alive. He could protect her for a day, maybe a week, but it would happen eventually. Had he lied when he’d told her he’d protect her?

“The, er...” He cleared his throat. “I could never just leave. For one, the amethyst tower was my home, but the times I did try to escape, she always found me. Trying to leave is seen as a betrayal and swiftly dealt with. As Elisandra’s son, I suffered... more than most.”

“And now your brother wants you dead?”

“Broods, huh.” His lips twisted. “How do elves discipline those who want to leave their flights?”

“A group of elves is called a pride.” Seraph’s smile bloomed.

“A pride of elves?” She nodded, and Lysander grinned back at her. That was ironically accurate.

“We don’t discipline anyone for leaving,” she continued. “Most don’t. Why would they leave the safety of the village?” Her smile snagged on a memory then faded from her lips.

“Akiem took you from your village?” Lysander guessed.

“They tracked us from the air. We... had traps, we even brought one down, but there were too many.” Her arms folded around herself again.

Lysander could only imagine the destruction his brother would have wrought upon finding an elven village. He wouldn’t have held back, not after finding those elves desecrating dragon bones. Seraph and the other one—Xena—were lucky to survive at all.

Seraph’s face had paled again. She looked at the strange sculpture and turned away. “Eroan doesn’t know. He left before it happened—”

Grumbling barks drew Lysander’s eye toward the door. Seraph heard it too. She threw a panicked look his way. “Come stand behind me,” he said. “Do as I say. If anything alarms you, just...” he wet his lips and gripped the chair’s arms. “...just don’t show it. Pretend like you’re stone—or steel.”

Dokul breezed in moments later with Mirann in tow. They both saw Lysander sprawled in the chair at the same time and failed to mask their joint surprise.

Mirann's predatory smile cut deeper into her cheeks. "I told you he wouldn't leave."

Her father tore off his breastplate and dropped it like it was trash. His heated glare fixed on Lysander. "Your brother's foolish actions weakened our defenses. We have a gaping hole in the warren!"

"Then you should have better defenses." Lysander made sure to wear the same blank look he'd perfected for his mother over the years.

Dokul blinked and frowned as though he couldn't have heard correctly, then barked a laugh. "You have some gall, princeling." He approached Lysander in the chair, his gaze burning hotter with every stride. "You brought this trouble to my door at a time I can ill afford to be distracted."

Lysander casually leaned to one side, it happened to be the side Seraph quivered on, as the bronze stalked forward. The elf's nervous energy crackled. She could act proud all she liked, but her fear betrayed her, and would likely arouse Dokul's instincts. Lysander was close enough to intervene, but he hoped it didn't come to that.

"All over elves and swords." Dokul veered from Lysander, reached out and cupped Seraph's face. She did well to look him in the eyes. "And one lost prince." His gaze slid to Lysander. He dropped his hand. "What brings you to my chambers, Lysander? What do you want?"

"War is inevitable, let us not pretend otherwise. And while Akiem's rule is legitimate, I trained the flights under him. A few discreet messages here and there, and I could take the tower right out from under him."

"You want to rule?" Dokul asked, measuring his tone carefully.

"No. I am... I am not a leader," Lysander's smile was coy, "but you are."

Lust and want sparkled in the bronze's eyes. Lysander was saying all the right things to an old, hungry dragon.

"All dragons will be stronger under you," he added.

Dokul swallowed with a click.

"Lysander—" Mirann began.

"Leave." Dokul snapped.

"Don't do this," Mirann growled. "You can't trust him, you know. But I can control—"

Dokul turned, "Leave, daughter. Lysander and I have much to discuss."

"He's protecting the elf." Mirann's too-sharp glare cut straight to Seraph, marking the elf for later.

Dokul narrowed his eyes at Lysander. “Is that true?”

Lysander’s leisurely smile ticked. He rose from the chair and looked Dokul in the eyes. “This elf is not to be touched, harmed or harassed in any way.”

The old dragon bared his teeth behind a leering grin. “And who are you to make demands in my warren? After the damage your brother left behind, this elf is surely mine.”

Lysander pressed a hand against the bronze’s cheek. His chin felt rough and leathery beneath the sweep of his thumb. He resisted the urge to shudder.

This had been coming for years, ever since Dokul had tried to rape him and learned Lysander wasn’t an easy catch. But if Lysander wanted Seraph kept safe, if he wanted to gain control of more than Mirann, if he wanted to rise up and teach them all what it meant to be wronged, then this had to happen—for now.

“You have a far more desirable prize at your fingertips.” Lysander deliberately wet his lips, drawing the bronze’s wide-eyed gaze downward to his mouth.

“Lysander is mine,” Mirann growled a territorial warning low in her throat.

Lysander ignored her and peered into Dokul’s gaze, keeping the male firmly under his spell. His mother had once said, long ago, after the third or fourth time she’d tried to kill him, how entrancing his gaze could be, like two pools of emeralds no dragon could resist. He used that gaze now, luring the ancient bronze in deep.

“Father!”

Dokul’s temper flared. He swung its heat on Mirann. “Get out!”

After she’d left, he looked again at Lysander. “I could take you anyway. By force, if necessary.”

“You tried that once. It did not end well for you.” Lysander flopped back into the chair and deliberately twisted so he could prop a leg over the chair’s arm. He dragged his knuckles down his jawline. “Wouldn’t you rather have me willingly?”

Lust flushed heat up the male’s neck and face. He glanced at the silent Seraph. “And you can take the amethyst’s tower without a battle?”

The bronze chief had always been so easy to read, and this arrangement was no different than the one he’d performed with Mirann. In many ways, it

was easier, and knowing Eroan was alive somewhere, knowing that foolish elf was out there, full of defiance and pride. It was enough to shore up Lysander and lend him the strength he needed to see this through.

Seraph caught his eye while the bronze peered at him. The elf's wide eyes were full of fear, for her, and perhaps for Lysander too. She was learning now what it took to survive as dragon among dragons. Especially a broken dragon prince.

Dokul braced an arm on the back of the chair over Lysander's head and leaned in so close his wet-metal scent filled Lysander's head and laced his throat. "You have no idea the beast you tempt... but you will."

Lysander swallowed. "Agree the elf is not to be touched."

Dokul locked his large, hot fingers around Lysander's throat and peered so close Lysander saw how the fire burned in his golden eyes. "When you play a foolish game with an ancient, do not expect to win, princeling."

"Agree..." Lysander wheezed. Instincts screamed at him to fight the male off, but it was too late to fight. It had to happen this way or not at all.

Dokul squeezed. "My bronze and I won't touch your elf, prince. Let it rot for all I care. But to make up for it, I'm going to own you in every way, until you can't breathe without tasting me, can't move without feeling me inside you. You have no idea what it is you've agreed to, but you will..." His grip loosened. He dragged his fingers down Lysander's panting chest, pulling the lamé shirt with them, making it cut into Lysander's neck. "You've just sold yourself for one pathetic little elf."

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CHAPTER 40



Eroan

BRISK, salty air dampened Eroan's cheeks and lashes. He closed his eyes, opening all other senses, and tilted his face toward the spray. Sunrays blazed today, soaking into his soul and warming him through. The ship hissed through the waves, its bow occasionally thumping against large swells. He tasted salt on his lips, felt it tighten his skin. This was freedom.

Bellows and calls sounded around him as the crew managed the enormous sails, harnessing the wind. These vast ships were ingenious, and the human fleet even more so. Opening his eyes, he spotted the three other ships carving through the waves to his left. To his right, two more thundered on, sails full. Their armored cladding shimmered in the sun.

"You look as though you were made for this." Chloe grinned, clutching the rail beside him.

He adjusted his sword slung against his back, and regarded her own armaments. A selection of short-bladed cutting daggers bristled at her hips and ankle straps. The arms of a modified crossbow peeked over her shoulder. Each bolt was dragontooth-tipped. She wouldn't have looked out of place among his Order.

"I am made for this..." He breathed in and held that breath, thinking of home, of all the times he'd dreamed of fighting back in force.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

He let the breath go and regarded her with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, it’s a human saying... You just... you seemed to be thinking so deeply.”

“I was thinking of a dragon.”

Her gaze thinned as it often did when the topic of dragons came up. “Just one?”

“Without him, none of this would be possible.” Eroan swallowed hard. Had Lysander not persisted in saving him, Eroan wouldn’t have made it this far, wouldn’t have known to harvest the teeth. Without Lysander, Eroan would have fallen outside the queen’s chamber just like the rest of his pride had.

“You never said how exactly you learned about the teeth...”

He tried to smile under her scrutiny and wasn’t sure he managed it. “One dragon insisted on saving me. Without him, I would be dead. Several times over.”

She huffed. “Likely for his own nefarious purposes. They never act out of kindness.”

“Perhaps...” Lysander seemed to have no motive other than trying to make sure one of them lived. Shaking his head free of the prince, Eroan glanced at the shimmering deck. “You’re not concerned they’ll see the sun reflected on the cladding?” he asked, eager to steer the conversation in a direction far from the prince.

Chloe fondly smiled at the question, losing some of her rigid tension. “No. The sun is behind us, we’re in its glare. They won’t see us approach. And as it dips to the west, we’ll shift to the east, low on the horizon.”

Eroan wasn’t entirely convinced. They seemed exposed on the flat of this great ocean. But this wasn’t the first time the humans had assaulted the bronze defenses, and he was no seaman.

His gaze wandered back onto the deck where the enormous ballista sat proudly at the bow, its heavy-duty spear—the size of a lance—lay wedged against its side, ready to be knocked. A polished and shaped dragontooth glistened at the end of the hardwood shaft. Each of the ships carried one just like it, and each of the hundred or so humans carried dragontooth weapons.

There were many human lives relying on his discovery.

“It will work.” Chloe shielded her eyes and squinted at him.

They trusted him. It had taken time to get this far. Time and patience. But with each mission to collect the teeth, and with Eroan having helped

bring down a dragon scout, putting the blades into action, they'd come around enough to give him his sword back. A few weeks later, one had asked him to teach her how to swing a sword and was quickly joined by more, and somewhere in all of that, he'd started feeling like he belonged.

Eroan had hoped to return to the bronze line with a stronger force, one combined with his own people, but there was no messaging them, not until the bronze line fell. This human fleet with its new weapons would have to be enough.

He gripped the rail tighter and squinted into the sun. "Aim for their eyes," he said. "Blinded, they're disorientated. The boats must get close. We can't afford to miss."

She settled a hand on his. "We know. We're ready."

He looked at her human hands. Pink and warm. Then up into her kind face. The salt air had nipped at her cheeks, brightened her eyes and mussed up any loose strands of hair, making her seem wilder than her usual steady calmness. "Perhaps we should run another drill..." He gently withdrew his hand and closed his fingers into a loose fist. She had begun to look at him differently in the last few days. It reminded him of how his people had looked at him in their unguarded moments like he could deliver them from darkness. They hadn't known how he'd carried that darkness inside of him, a darkness he hoped he would soon wipe clean.

Chloe arched her eyebrow and leaned against the rail to admire the bustling crew. "If they don't know it by now, one more drill isn't going to make a difference. The sun is shining, the ocean is kind. Let them have this moment."

Because it may be their last...

This had to work. He'd lost too much for it not to. *Alumn, guide these humans and their aim.*

He didn't often pray—Alumn was always listening—but today they would need Her grace. *Make their faith in me be true. Make my survival mean something.* If the bronze line fell, the humans would message their prides and more would come. Without the bronze line, the amethyst were exposed. He hoped it hadn't been too long since the Dragon Queen fell, hoped they were still in turmoil.

If he could get through the line and return to his village, the Order would come, they'd rally more elves. This could be the beginning of the end of the dragons' reign.

He breathed in and felt the winds of change root him in the moment.

A glimmer far ahead caught his eye. He shifted position to the bow. The white cliffs, from this distance, looked like teeth rising from the waves. And there, above them, dragons circled. Too many at once. "Something is wrong."

Chloe lifted a spy-glass. "I see them... They're a long way off."

"You see how they're clustered over one spot, riding the thermals to the east?"

"Yes, we've seen them do that many times. They're patrolling, perhaps looking for something."

"One or two, but not so many. Look to the west..." He breathed slow, trying to steady his racing heart. They couldn't have hoped for this. "Their lines are scattered. They're exposed."

"Why would they...?" she wondered aloud. "Do you think it's a trap to lure us to the west?"

"If they knew we were approaching, yes. But you say we're hidden inside the sun's glare." He watched them soar again. From this distance, they were little more than beetles in the air. "Something has them distracted..." He couldn't imagine what would draw the dragons away from their posts but knew they likely wouldn't get this opportunity again.

She lowered her spy-glasses and for a moment, stared ahead, her glare determined. It was a risk, heading toward the west as the sunset would put them on the horizon line. But this was an opportunity to get close, to possibly make-land, to perhaps even breach the bronze line and bring it down.

Chloe turned her back on the wind, swept her hair back from her face and cast her gaze across her crew and those of the other ships. Any doubt vanished from her face. "Hard to port!"

The crew sprang into action. Rigging clanged and jolted, shouts went up, and it all seemed to work in glorious harmony to tilt the ship beneath Eroan's feet and turn the vessel leftward. The other ships responded, and within minutes, the fleet was heading parallel with the distant cliffs.

Eroan caught Chloe's eye and offered her a comforting smile. "It will work."

She nodded and swallowed, concern hiding in the tightness of her eyes.

CHAPTER 41



Lysander

LYSANDER WANDERED the damaged section of warren where his brother had laid waste to its construction and torn a hole in the ceiling to escape. Much of it had been dismantled and carted off but work still progressed. Bronze lowers bustled through the tunnels, focused on their tasks, while those as dragon circled above, searching for any signs Akiem might return.

It had been weeks since the scuffle, but time meant little to his brother. He would return again and again until he secured Lysander back under amethyst wing. Which was likely, Lysander assumed, why Dokul hadn't yet called in the deal they had made. The bronze chief had largely ignored Lysander, besides a few long looks from across a room, and that made the wait worse. At least Seraph was safe, for now. Plenty of bronze had eyed the young elf like she was to be their next meal. Only her association with Lysander and his with Dokul had saved her. It wouldn't last. None of this would last, and the itch in Lysander's blood made him wonder if today was the day Dokul would call in the debt.

"Tell me more of Eroan," he said, drawing Seraph closer with his words. From his position on a walkway slung over the pit, they could talk privately and weren't likely to be disturbed. Bronze lowers fetched and carried stone and metal. Tools clanged and commands were barked.

The young elf had at first been reluctant to speak of her mentor, but as the days had gone on and Lysander had pestered, she'd slowly opened up.

"He was due to be an elder. We all knew it. He didn't, and I don't think he appreciated the decision being made without him."

Lysander could imagine Eroan pushing back against a decision like that. The elf had pushed back against *everything*. "Isn't he a bit young to be an *elder*?"

Seraph raised a dark eyebrow. "No more than you are too young to be a prince."

He chuckled. "All right, point made."

She fell quiet for a few moments "There are too few older elves left. We do not live long. Not anymore."

He had never killed an elf, but knew, before his time, his brood had almost wiped them out. "I am sorry."

"Are you?" she snapped and then softened with a sigh. "How long must I stay here?"

"Until we can slip you away unnoticed." He watched her face fall. "Is my company so hideous?"

"No, it's..." She clutched at the rope keeping them from dropping the hundred feet or so into the pit below. "I don't know how he survived among you for so long."

Lysander breathed deeply, drawing the hot metal smell into his lungs. It didn't burn like it used to, but the heat and dust had worn Seraph's edges away. She'd been a bright, fiery thing when she'd arrived, but in the past few weeks, she'd lost her spark. He had seen the same happen to Eroan, though it had taken much longer. Elves needed light and freedom, but Lysander could not give it to her, not yet.

The air tightened, and below, a tension spilled through the workers. Dokul had arrived.

Seraph said something but Lysander's thoughts had wandered as he watched the bronze stalk through his brood. There was a whole world of pain coming, and soon.

"I still don't understand why you're protecting me."

"Because, as you said, there aren't many of you left, and that is a crime. You were human protectors once, I think?"

"Yes. Our ancestors were their silent guardians for thousands of years."

"Well then. Someone should repay that service."

She scowled. "But you're a dragon."

"I'd noticed."

"You're not like any dragon I've known."

"Known many, have you?"

"I've known *of* many. Bronze, Silver and Gold, were the first. They came from fire and ice in a faraway land. They were different from the jeweled ones of today. Elven history says humans helped make the second generation by using some terrible weapon full of fire and power, but instead of killing the dragons, it made them evolve. The jeweled are worse than the metals. More vicious, ruthless, they spread like a plague. Elves had warned of using such a weapon, and after it happened, they split from humans. A divided force could not hold the dragons back. We have been fighting to stay alive ever since. We are not a war-loving people, but we soon realized we could not survive alone. The Order was formed. Our own protectors. Not for humans, for us. We learned all about dragons from our ancestors, but this time, we learned how to survive them. So yes, I know enough."

She reeled it off as though she'd heard it many times. He imagined how elves would sit around a roaring fire in their villages and tell tales of the past and how things had come to be as they were today. Of course, nothing like that scene existed for him. Elisandra had been the knowledge-keeper, hoarding intelligence like gems. Now Dokul was the only history-keeper left.

A bronze lower slinked onto the walkway, bronze jewelry glinting. "Dokul has requested you both meet him in his chambers."

Lysander nodded, dismissing the bronze, and gritted his teeth under Seraph's concerned glance. The moment was upon him. How bad could it be, really? Looking up through the hole in the earth, he remembered soaring for what felt like forever on those thermals, like the dragons circling high above. "Steel yourself, elf. And know, whatever happens next, I'll survive." She blinked large eyes at him. "And so will you."

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CHAPTER 42



Eroan

THE CLIFFS WERE ferocious on approach. Ocean waves churned at their base, whipping the water and air into a foam and mist frenzy. Had Eroan seen the wall of rocks from this side first, he might have reconsidered climbing down them. The fleet was still some distance offshore but close enough to hear the occasional thunder of breakers pummeling rocks.

“Easy now!” Chloe yelled into the sound of flapping sails and clanging rigging. “Not too close!”

The fat sun lingered low to the west, behind them now, casting the deck in an eerie flame-orange light. He hoped it wasn’t an omen. With one eye on the skies, he examined the crew’s weapons and answered any last questions they had before the battle began. The ballista was armed and ready, pointed toward the east for the attack when it came. Now all they had to do was get close enough to safely launch the skiffs.

He shielded his eyes and looked toward the sun. Their window of opportunity was a small one. Wait too long, and the ships would be silhouetted on the horizon instead of sitting beneath it.

“Ready the skiffs!” Gabe’s bellows sailed on the salted wind.

“Ready the skiffs!” Chloe echoed. The command continued on the lips of the crew until all the ships were filling their small landing boats.

One last time, Eroan eyed the ballista with its barbed dragontooth arrow. When those weapons let their arrows fly, dragons would fall. Anticipation had his heart galloping, and for a few seconds, he allowed himself to dream of returning to his village with the knowledge that the bronze line had fallen. *That* was a worthy victory he would claim with pride. He could take that back to his people without shame, back to Janna and Curan and have them look at him with honor, not pity.

A shadow clipped a cloud. He saw it the moment the call went up. “Dragon!”

He dashed to the block-and-tackle ropes lowering the landing boats into the water. “Get the skiffs in now!”

A glance behind him revealed the dragon banking, tilting its broad wings side-on as it tried to sight them below. At that distance, the ships would look like rocks scattered close to the shore. There was a chance it might dismiss the fleet as just that.

The landing craft thumped onto the water, and its crew extended the oars. They had half a dozen boats in. Two more still hung from their ropes.

Hurry!

A bark from above and Eroan’s heart hammered faster. “Ready the ballista!”

Men and women burst into action, each knowing their places, and above, the dragon beat its wings, keeping itself aloft in a position far beyond the range of the arrow. Down the coast, three other winged beasts broke from their formation. Their dark marks grew larger against silvery clouds.

This was it.

This was the moment where it would all come together.

They could not fail.

He could not fail them.

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CHAPTER 43



Lysander

LYSANDER DREW BACK Dokul's heavy curtains and entered the bronze chief's private chambers. Scattered wreckage glimmered in the corners of the room, a hollowed-out rock with holes above for ventilation. Torches illuminated alcoves, and as if their heat wasn't enough, a fireplace throbbed in one corner, throwing out wave after wave of sweltering air.

"Strip," Dokul ordered.

The bronze was sitting in a large, ornate chair, built from rusted and twisted metals. It resembled something Lysander's mother would have used to torture her prisoners in. He quickly pushed thoughts of his mother away and reached behind his neck to unlatch the lamé shirt. "The elf?" he enquired, slowly making his way across the room.

Dokul didn't take his eyes from him. "She stays." Dilated pupils swallowed the sight Lysander presented.

Inwardly, Lysander winced. He had some pride left—a tiny kernel his mother hadn't beaten out of him—and had hoped the elf would be spared witnessing this.

"Mirann?" he asked.

The bronze's glare flashed with annoyance. "My daughter is preoccupied with repairs. As I have been..." He leaned forward, setting his

armor and bangles rattling, and rolled his great shoulders. “Elf, come here.” Still, he kept his eyes on Lysander’s slow approach.

Seraph moved by him, and Lysander plucked the shirt off, over his head, using the motion to distract from what the bronze might have planned for the elf. The chief wouldn’t touch her. They’d made a deal and there was no way, with the lust so raw on Dokul’s face, that he’d risk losing Lysander’s cooperation.

“Remove my chestplate,” the chief ordered.

Seraph obeyed without hesitation. *Good.* She unlatched the heavy plates from behind and pulled them off, revealing Dokul’s bronze-skinned chest and large, powerful shoulders. When she set it down beside the throne-like chair, her eyes flicked to Lysander. He kept his glare firmly locked with Dokul’s and pushed his rattling nerves down.

Lysander preferred his males slimmer, built for stamina, not force. In fact, he would have preferred not to be here at all, but as half a dragon and without a flight, he had only his allegiance and body left to bargain with. His mother had figuratively fucked him over enough times. What difference was this?

Dokul brushed a hand over his smooth head and down the back of his neck. As Lysander drew close, the bronze settled back in the chair, roaming his hungry gaze where soon his hands might follow. The heat in his eyes wasn’t entirely unwelcome, and Lysander’s own desires began to stir awake. He could help by summoning the memory of a powerful, stubborn elf tied beneath him.

“Stop.” Dokul flicked his fingers, lending the command weight. The male drew out the seconds. Heat stole the air and dried Lysander’s throat. But the intensity of the older male’s gaze set loose a shiver of goosebumps and shortened Lysander’s breaths. A long, long time ago, Dokul had been a storm of destruction in an unprepared world. That beast still lurked deep inside, hidden so far down, Lysander wondered if he imagined the weight of it in the room. His mother had warned him but said nothing more. Surely, nothing could be worse than her.

Dokul swallowed and lifted his chin. “Remove your trousers. I want to see all of you.”

Lysander opened his belt, let it hang loose, and flicked open the buttons, one. By. One. A lifetime under Elisandra meant he’d learned to hide the swirl of thoughts trying to trip him up. Thoughts like where this was going

and how it would end. Thoughts like the one trying to root in him now, the one telling him this was wrong, that he didn't want Dokul, didn't want to be here in this fucking heat, in this mausoleum of a warren or anywhere near the salted air making everything taste like blood and rust. And doubts—like the one whispering how he shouldn't have killed the queen because at least under her, he'd had a place among his own kind.

He'd stopped undressing. Dokul's narrowing gaze speared into his. His heart missed a beat, and with it, he caught Seraph's pale, wide-eyed face and felt his gut plummet. No, no, no... he had to stay in control if this—

"Don't look at the pet." Dokul shot to his feet. "You look at me and only me." The male was all he could see, all he could smell. A wall of slick muscle and ancient power that had the primal part of Lysander caught between hunkering down or snapping back. "You are mine now. You understand?"

Lysander swallowed a bitter taste and breathed hard through his nose. His heart was a galloping thing trying to break free and his blood like fire, trying to spur him into a fight he couldn't win. The bronze wasn't some lower dragon he could bully into submission. This creature was as old as earth.

Panic squeezed his chest. Lysander did the only thing he could think of. He caught the male by the back of the neck and pulled him into a forced kiss. The bronze felt like stone in his hands, on his lips. Didn't matter. He'd agreed to this. It would help unseat Akiem and save the fucking elf. Who was watching all of this like a damned rabbit caught out after dark. She reeked of fear and rage. The kind of heady concoction that would get her killed if Dokul noticed. So Lysander shoved his tongue into the bronze's yielding mouth like he hated the bastard, and gripped the male's neck harder. There was no getting away from this.

Dokul clamped both his huge, hot hands loosely around Lysander's throat and growled into the kiss. The deep, luscious sound rumbled through his chest and sank into Lysander's bones, stoking the fires hotter, brighter, luring the beast in him out of its hiding place and spilling its needs and wants through his veins. The shift tried to stretch beneath his skin and remake him. Lysander tore from the kiss and shoved Dokul back, more on instinct than thought, but it was a mistake. Dokul stumbled into the chair, caught himself, and growled low in his throat.

By diamonds, Lysander had just made this so much worse.

Dokul grabbed his wrist and pulled, either to trap Lysander against him or throw him into the chair, but the raw beast in Lysander wasn't submitting. The right hook was a tight, precise blow and it landed across Dokul's jaw, exactly where Lysander had imagined it would go. Had the chair not caught him, Dokul would have hit the floor.

Pain flared up Lysander's arm. He let it, and grabbed Seraph, then shoved her toward the door. "You can't see this. Get out of here!"

Seraph whirled, eyes so wide. "Look out!" she screamed.

The arm flew around Lysander's throat like a thick, muscled noose. His balance fell out from under him. Dokul dragged him into his heaving chest. Lysander's lungs stretched, fighting to draw in air. He dug his fingers into the male's forearm, trying to pry it from constricting his throat. Stars exploded. Red spilled into his vision.

"Get off him!" the elf screeched.

The arm was gone, but hot hands were still on him, shoving. Lysander hit the bed chest first. He sunk his fingers into the sheets and breathed too-hot air deep into his lungs. Every breath refilled his sight and pushed out the thumping in his head.

The elf screamed.

No! The deal! Lysander twisted. The room spun, all shining metals ticking in the heat. Dokul had Seraph lifted in the air. She clawed at his grip on her neck.

"Hey, we had a deal!" Lysander growled out, letting some of the dragon slip through, lending his threat weight. "Are you going to fuck me or fuck with that tiny little elf? She's not worth your time. But I am."

Dokul's grip twitched. Seraph's eyelids fluttered closed.

"You son of a breeding-bitch!" Lysander rumbled. "Drop her or I'll kill you. Don't think I won't..."

Dokul's grin grew. He tossed Seraph away. Her little body hit a pile of metal at an awkward angle and crumpled into a heap at its base, but Lysander saw how she moved, tried to stand. Relief poured through him. She was alive. Of course she was. Elves kept right on surviving...

Something Lysander knew well.

Dokul tore open his belt and wiped his free hand across his leering grin. "Oh, I don't doubt you'd try, you jeweled whelp."

Shit, this was happening. He hadn't planned it this way. Not like this. He would have been the one controlling Dokul's desires, and now the brute

was going to fuck him, just like he'd wanted years ago.

Seraph was shifting, rising, clawing her way off the floor, using the metal sculpture to haul herself up. If she stayed there, stayed out of this, she'd be all right. He tried to will her to turn, to look at him, to read the warning on his face.

"Got a thing for elves, haven't you." Dokul grabbed at Lysander's ankle. "I'll fuck that right out of you, pretty one."

Lysander kicked out, cracking the brute under the chin for all the good it did him. Dokul caught his other ankle and yanked, dragging Lysander down the bed to its edge. The bronze's fingers sank into Lysander's loose belt and pulled, tearing his trousers down, below his knees, then off altogether.

Finally, Seraph looked. But it wasn't fear on her face. That little elf's eyes had narrowed to knife-like slits, and her lips were pulled back in a vicious sneer, revealing tiny sharp teeth. Fuck, no. She was going to get herself killed.

Lysander shook his head. *Please don't.*

She sank her hand into her pocket and pulled out two rectangular blocks joined together with a length of chain. What...? Eroan's firestarter. She'd taken it from his room. When or why? She probably didn't even know Eroan had given it to Lysander, but there it was, like a talisman in her hand.

The bronze shoved his own loose trousers over his hips and down his thighs, freeing his taut erection. He cupped it, presenting the engorged cock to Lysander like a damned trophy. Lysander couldn't damn well miss it. He'd heard Dokul was endowed, but the rumors had undersold him.

"Scream, if you want." Dokul stroked from base to tip and planted a knee on the bed. "I prefer it when they do."

"I'm not screaming for you. We had a deal. You touched the elf. The deal's off."

Dokul laughed his deep, rumbling laughter. "Foolish kit. You think I care about any deal you make. You have nothing. Everything you are, I own. You walked into my warren and gave yourself to me. You are in no position to dictate my actions or your own."

"Sire!" someone called.

Dokul tensed at the sound of the new voice.

Lysander couldn't see behind Dokul's mass to pinpoint the new bronze in the room.

"Get out." Dokul's top lip rippled.

“Sire, the humans have a fleet—”

“Get out!” he roared, still staring at Lysander.

Lysander bared his teeth and let his own growl bubble.

“That’s it, pretty green eyes. Growl for me.”

Whether the lower had left, or where Seraph was, Lysander didn’t know. All he knew for sure was that fighting Dokul would make it worse. He’d weathered his mother’s twisted affections since the first memory of having her force him into her bed, among her harem. He’d lived with the shame of knowing he was broken among his kind. Lived as an outcast while still within the tower walls. This could not be any worse than that.

Dokul stroked his own erection, placed his other knee on the bed, straddling Lysander’s knees, tore his belt free from where it hung from its loops and snapped it taut.

It can always be worse.

The brute braced an arm against the bed and looped one end of the belt behind Lysander’s neck, bringing him close enough for Lysander to wonder if he could bite that grin right off the bastard’s face.

“With every generation, the jeweled get stronger. Did you know that?” Dokul spoke softer now as he drew the tail of the belt through its loop and tightened it.

Leather brushed Lysander’s collarbone, along with the bronze’s warm fingers. Down those fingers sank, down over Lysander’s right pec, down where his lungs heaved and then rippled over his abs.

“It’s why your mother bred relentlessly. And you’re the one who taught her that amethyst quirk.” Dokul slowly tightened the belt, choking Lysander.

“Amethyst, opal, diamond... and you, a nothing emerald. A weakness from the outside. She tried to kill you. When that didn’t work, Akiem tried. She mentioned you to me—a throwaway comment about her wretched weakling of a son, but even then, she knew it to be a lie. You were no weaker than she was.”

The leather dug in, closing Lysander’s throat. It would be all right. Dokul wouldn’t kill him, just so long as he played this game. But in Lysander’s glare, he made sure Dokul saw the fire within. The bronze got off on it, soaked in it, the brute panted his lust and need, his cock nudging Lysander’s hip. It didn’t matter. Lysander could no more quell his own fire than he could shut out the starlight or fly again.

“Every time she tried to kill you or had Akiem attempt it, you came back stronger. Every time you flew with your flights and battled the lost ones to the north, you came back stronger.” Dokul straightened and pulled the belt tighter, making Lysander’s heart stutter. “Every single time.” Dokul spread his hand on Lysander’s chest, admiring the shuddering rise and fall. “She pushed you, and the stronger you became. Hate made your fire burn hotter. You were ore, rough and unwieldy, until she forced you to survive. There, you forged yourself into a weapon with a heart of steel. When you killed her... Tell me,” he yanked tight and gasped, “tell me she was afraid.”

Dokul kissed away any answer Lysander could have given, then shuddered, hips thrusting at nothing. Lysander knew lust when it danced on his tongue and clamped his hand against the back of Dokul’s head, holding the bronze down, drowning him in a kiss drenched with that same hate he’d used to kill his mother.

None of this mattered because despite the belt, Lysander had control and the thrill of it spilled need into his veins. A need to take and own. He reached between them and dragged his fingertips from below Dokul’s balls, up the male’s hard shaft, making the ancient dragon gasp into his mouth.

Maybe he was like his mother, he realized, as he stroked the bronze into a panting, writhing, mindless creature. Hadn’t she done the same to him over and over again?

Dokul pulled from the kiss and let out a wrought, agonized moan. “Stop,” the male breathed. But Lysander had no intention of stopping. Only one of them had the power here. He circled his fingers, making the pulls shorter, faster and when his gaze captured Dokul’s, the ancient beast inside peered back, lost to his primitive urges.

He should have known the elf would screw it up.

She sprang onto Dokul’s back, looped her skinny arm around his neck and drew the steel portion of the firestarter across Dokul’s throat, opening a second bloody smile.

Lysander blinked, trying to clear the sudden splash of red blurring his left eye. Dokul’s hot seed spurted into his hand, but that seemed far less important now that the bastard had a shiny new smile in his neck where smiles should not be.

Dokul reared up, reached behind him, and tore Seraph from his back. He flung her across her room. She struck the chair. This time when she fell, she lay motionless, but the bronze wasn’t done. He staggered off the bed,

apparently oblivious to the stream of blood soaking his chest, made it two steps after her, then dropped to a knee.

If the son of a bitch died, Lysander was screwed whatever way he looked at it. “Fucking elves!” He wiped his hand clean on the sheet, clambered off the bed, pulled on his trousers, rounded on Dokul—still on his knees, gaping like a fish at the fallen elf. Between Seraph and the bronze chief lay the bloody firestarter. Lysander scooped it up and wiped blood from its edges. All right, so he hadn’t planned for this.

Think!

He had to get the elf away before the bronze recovered—if the bronze chief recovered—and somehow make it so he wasn’t implicated in trying to kill another leader.

“Father!”

Lysander whirled. Mirann stormed into the room, done up in her battle armor with an expression to match. She took one look at Lysander, at her father bleeding out on his knees, and barely even glanced at the elf.

He held his hands palm-out. “This is not what it looks like.”

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CHAPTER 44



Eroan

FLAMES STRAFED the side of the ship, blasted over the deck and extinguished again in less than a second, leaving soot and embers dallying in the air. Steam momentarily blinded the crew and Eroan with them. Then a swift wind swept it off-deck, revealing the dragons circling for another blast.

“Fire!” Eroan yelled.

The ballista let loose its enormous arrow. It sailed high, whistling into the air. Other arrows whistled in a chorus of strikes. Eroan’s heart thudded, his thoughts fell into silence, and the moment stretched on. He watched those arrows fly, willing them to strike home. *Alumn, make this be the moment, guide those arrows home. Guide me home...*

They missed. Some sailed on, some clanked off scales and tumbled out of the sky.

No!

Something cracked inside Eroan. Hopes, maybe. Dreams, certainly.

Arrows plunged into the sea, and the dragons spiraled higher, building height for their fatal swooping blows.

The skiffs. They had to make it now...

Eroan saw some riding the surf, oars stuck out at awkward angles. Yes, they still had a chance.

A dragon screamed. He'd heard the sound before, the first time he'd killed one. It sounded like ice breaking or the earth splitting. They screamed that way when they died.

Above, one of them was clawing at the air like it could try to climb it, but its wings were failing, its body falling. The beast twitched and tumbled, and at just the right moment, Eroan saw it clutch at an arrow protruding from its neck. The beast couldn't breathe.

An arrow had found its target. It was dying. Eroan knew it. "Reload!"

The men gawked at the twitching, falling beast.

"*Reload!*" he bellowed. They were too slow! He dashed in, scooped up a second enormous arrow and rammed it home. Then, taking the ballista's frame in both hands, it heaved its wheels into position, lifting its sights among the swirling beasts. He could taste blood, like he'd been able to taste the blood of those he'd killed fleeing the tower. Forcing his heart to slow, he pushed out the noise, the shouts, the swell of the ocean, and the screams until all that existed was the ballista in his hands and the dragon in his sights. The ship dropped, the dragon soared, wings spread, beginning its descent. *Yes, stay on that line.* The ocean lifted the ship once more and Eroan fired. The ballista jolted, the arrow flew, and the crew saw—Eroan saw—as the arrow punched into the beast's right eye. Whoops and cheers filled the air. The dragon didn't reach for the arrow like he'd expected, but simply stopped. Its right wing drooped, and the beast flipped over and down it went. Down, down, down until it crashed into the waves, sending up a blast of water.

Other arrows flew, and this time, they found their targets.

Dragons rained from above. One, two, five, eight... yes, yes! Every arrow was finding its mark now, and they screamed... they screamed so loudly Eroan was sure blessed Alumn herself would hear them.

He heard the warning shout too late and turned toward it in time to see the wings spread like they could encompass the whole ship, and the jaws open. The beast came down on the ship, planting its clawed-feet in the deck. It snapped the main mast with a single bite, sending ropes and rigging flying and sails tumbling. The ship listed suddenly toward its heavy side, tilting the deck at an impossible angle and sending anything not tied down crashing into the guardrails. Eroan fell hard and tumbled. He clutched at a rail only to find it rolling with him. He clawed at the deck, dug his nails in,

cutting open his fingers, and snagged some kind of notch in the wood, jolting to a halt. Noise and fire and pain, cracking wood, cracking bones.

The dragon beat its wings to keep from falling backward into the sea then it let out a deafening screech.

Eroan freed his sword. In the chaos of motion and noise and screams and water, he heard the shouts of men and women dying. No, he had not led them here to die! He'd kill all the dragons himself if he had to. *For Alumn!*

The beast snapped at something slipping and sliding toward it. Its jaws clamped closed on a man. It tossed back its head and threw the still-screaming human into his mouth then smiled its reptilian smile. With its head up, Eroan saw the firepit low in its throat glow. He tightened his grip on the sword and let go of the deck. The tilt of the ship sent him skidding almost vertically down. *Stay there... Don't move, dragon.* The dragon's foreleg lifted. Then it saw Eroan, and its large, slitted eye widened, fixing him beneath its glare.

I am Eroan Ilanea, I was forged in the fires of Ifreann, quenched in Alumn's maelstrom, for one purpose... to kill.

He slammed his heel into the rail, sprang, and plunged the sword deep into the beast's fiery gullet. The sword sank in clean and true. The beast choked out its screams. Liquid fire spewed, splashing Eroan's face and neck. Then a blast of icy-cold water slammed over him, tore him free, and pulled him down, down, down into its cold embrace. He still clutched the sword like it might somehow save him, even as above him, the ship rolled into the pool of light and the dragon rolled with it, plunging into the water, throwing Eroan into a complete, churning darkness.

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CHAPTER 45



Lysander

MIRANN CAME AT LYSANDER, teeth and blades flashing. “The humans are attacking our lines,” she exclaimed. “We’re scattered and disorganized and our chief has his knees in a pool of his own blood with his cock hanging out? And you...” She stopped, tilted her head at her father, then eyed Lysander again from the corner of her eye. “I’m not sure about you yet.”

He tensed for the attack, but as the seconds passed and she continued to regard him as though trying to place the pieces of a puzzle, he reassembled her words in his mind. “Humans are what?”

She snorted. “The parasites saw a weak spot and took advantage. It’s being dealt with, but this...” She flung a hand at her gasping father. “His timing is terrible.” Her gaze turned back toward Lysander, morphing into something slippery and sly. “Did he at least fuck you?”

“No.”

“Pity. He’ll only want you more now you’ve cut him.”

Lysander wasn’t about to correct her on who had been the one to cut her father. Seraph still lay out cold. Avoiding the growing pool of blood, he moved to the elf’s side. Her pulse beat strong against his fingers, but there was no knowing what damage had been done internally. She would die here. Maybe not now, from this, but eventually. He had to get her away from the bronze for good.

Mirann's gaze sat heavy on his back. Apparently, she was impressed with the fuck-up she'd walked in on. And Lysander had thought amethyst were wired wrong. The bronze took fucked-up to a whole new level. Maybe all dragons were wired wrong. Now wasn't the time to think on it.

Seraph's face held a soft, peaceful expression. Did she dream of her home, now destroyed by Akiem? Lysander sighed. None of this felt right. The only time anything had felt right, he'd been watching an elf sleep through campfire flames.

"The humans are attacking... now?" He brushed Seraph's choppy black hair back from her face and let his fingers softly dally on her cheek.

"By boat. It's not unusual. They keep trying and dying. Why?"

Were they the humans Eroan had gone to? If they were, they'd be armed with new weapons, and this little routine attack wasn't routine at all.

The bronze were about to be very distracted.

If he could get Seraph to the beach, the humans might take her in. And maybe he could help them in other ways too...

Dokul clutched at his neck and slumped to the side. Seraph's cut wouldn't kill him. It hadn't been deep enough. But he'd be weak and vulnerable for the next few hours.

"Dokul's no good to anyone like this." He tucked his arms under Seraph and scooped her body against his chest, then stood and headed for the door. "Someone needs to organize your flights. I'm assuming that someone is you?"

"Yes," Mirann agreed. "I should return..."

"Then go do that." On, he walked, heading back to his chamber. "I'll be right behind you."

"Where are you taking the elf?"

A barked alarm sounded somewhere far off but loud enough to shudder through the warren walls. A warning call for reinforcements. Mirann swore behind him, and his raggedy heart warmed at the sounds of chaos beginning to unfold around him. "Go."

She caught his arm and pulled him up short. Suspicion narrowed her eyes. She always had been smarter than her father. If they fought here over an elf, it would further weaken the line. Her place was elsewhere and she knew it.

"You're needed on the line," he said, a subtle reminder of her duty.

"So are you, Lysander Bronze."

He nodded. "I'll be there." He couldn't fly, but he'd be expected to hold the line from the battlements.

Another bark shook the walls. Mirann turned back toward the outer tunnels and marched away. The next time he saw her, Seraph would be safe, and that was all that mattered. He veered down a side-tunnel, toward the sound of waves thundering against rock and screaming dragons.



THE CAVE AIR GREW DAMP, and the heat gave way to a brisk, salted breeze. Torches flickered, their flames barely clinging on. In all the rumbling noise, Lysander didn't see the gang of humans until they were more almost upon him.

He stopped, positioned partially above them on a slippery rock as one by one they saw him in the gloom. Warriors, all of them, armed with short swords, compact crossbows, and grizzled expressions. Eight men and women, and all looked at him like the second he put the elf down they'd take great pleasure in killing him.

How had they even known about the tunnel?

Didn't matter now.

They were here, and Seraph in his arms was likely the only reason they hadn't attacked.

The leader, an older male at the front of the gang, rested his crossbow at his hip. "Put the elf down," he said, voice heavily accented as though from a foreign land.

If he did that, this would no longer be a civilized conversation. "I have no intention of hurting anyone."

"Put her down."

Eight dragon-killers. As dragon, he could crush them—maybe. Their weapons glinted with familiar tips. Eroan had been busy.

"I'm bringing her to you. I can help you."

"You can set her down right by your feet there, and we'll take good care of her." The man in charge had eyes like flint, like he'd seen so much death in his life it had crawled inside him and turned his soul to rock. He'd pull that trigger, and he wouldn't miss.

How could Lysander explain who he was, that he wouldn't hurt them? Seraph might have been able to speak up for him, but she wasn't waking anytime soon.

"I'm going to set her down nice and slow. You don't need to attack. I'm not going to hurt you. I can help you get inside... There's a forge deep inside the warren. If you get inside and disrupt the flow of molten iron, you can bring this whole operation to a stop. But you'll need me to find it."

They glared back, each one as cold and hard as the weapons they carried. Maybe they didn't all speak his language? His heart hammered faster. He'd come here to save Seraph, but dying for her hadn't been a part of that plan. If he set her down and went for his sword, they'd fire. If he moved, said the wrong thing, they'd fire. They'd likely fire the second they had a clear shot. And all for an elf he barely knew. He looked down at her face nestled against his shoulder. Her village was gone. Her whole world, her family, wrecked by Akiem.

Lysander sighed.

Very little had felt right in his life, but this did. Out of the two of them, she deserved to live.

He adjusted her weight and stepped down off the raised rock. The gang bristled and rattled their weapons. "Easy... I'm just putting her down, like you asked." Inch by inch he lowered her and set her gently down by his boots. She'd be all right. She was a fighter, like another elf he knew. He gritted his teeth, breathed in, and straightened.

They fired.

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CHAPTER 46



Eroan

EROAN TOOK the hand offered to him and let the man yank him to his feet out of the shoving surf. He coughed and spat a mouthful of sand and salt water. His throat burned. His lungs heaved. But he was alive. For a while there, he'd felt and seen nothing but darkness...

"You all right?" The man... Jeremy, Eroan recalled from their training sessions, gripped Eroan's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "You got a nasty cut... maybe you should sit this out. We'll come back for you."

Sit it out? Eroan's mouth found a smile even if the rest of him didn't feel much like grinning. His head throbbed, his arm too, where the sword he'd been holding had snagged in the rocks and nearly twisted it out of its socket. But he still had the sword and had used it to claw his way over the rocks.

Firelight blasted from behind. An explosion rocked the air. Eroan flinched, knowing men like Jeremy were dying on the ships. The skies above swarmed with wings, but they were falling too.

"I'm going in with you," he croaked.

"All right... but keep up." Jeremy patted him fondly on the shoulder. "I hear they caught one alive." The man's eyes gleamed with pride. "Got an elf too. They're bringing her out now."

An elf? Why would there be an elf at the bronze line? “Wait...” Eroan tried to draw Jeremy back, but the man was already stomping toward the gang readying their weapons.

There was no reason for an elf to be here unless they’d been caught. Perhaps they would have news of the elves’ efforts to secure more dragons teeth. They could have launched an assault from their side!

With renewed fire in his blood, he followed Jeremy’s boot prints in the shingle. Someone handed him a rag. He wiped at the wetness on his face and winced as it came away soaked in blood. He shouldn’t go inside, he knew that, but nothing short of death would stop him now.

“There she is...”

Three men clambered toward them. One carried the elf in his arms. An elf missing the tip of her ear.

Eroan’s heart stuttered. His blood turned to ice. “No...” It couldn’t be Seraph. He’d told her not to follow him. She was supposed to stay behind... He took a few staggering steps forward and almost fell. Someone caught him, held him up. He should thank them, but he couldn’t take his eyes from Seraph. Her pale face was thinner than he remembered. Her eyes were closed. He’d left her, and she’d followed. “Is she... dead?” he whispered.

“No, she’s breathing. But she’s been out a while. I’ll see if I can signal one of the landing skiffs. It’s going to be tough getting her off this beach, but we...”

The man’s words vanished behind the *thump-thump* of Eroan’s heart. The second man threw a sword in the sand. A sword identical to the one on Eroan’s back. Of course, he’d given it to Seraph. But seeing it here drove another nail into his heart.

“Do you know her?” someone asked him.

“Y-yes... I...”

A third man frog-marched a prisoner in front of him. A bag covered his head. A bag like the one Eroan remembered. Pain knotted like a fist in his chest.

The dragonkin’s wrists were bound. Blood dripped from his fingers. Eroan’s insides knotted tighter at the sight of those restraints. He tasted bitterness on his tongue and swallowed the bile back down. The prisoner’s boots left bloody prints in the sand. He was wounded, badly by the steady stream of red soaking his legs. The bag over his head hid his expression, but his bronze clothing marked his brood easily enough.

The warrior stopped with his quarry in front of Eroan. “What should we do with him?”

They were asking him? He looked at Seraph motionless in the man’s arms. The dragons would have beaten her, mutilated her, used her in every way. Everything he’d narrowly avoided, they would have inflicted upon her. Rape, torture, starved of light. And the bronze were the worst of them. Perhaps it was better she had died than to live as a used, damaged thing. But she was here now, and she would live. He’d make sure she was safe.

“Kill him,” Eroan growled. The dragonkin bucked against his bindings and mumbled into the hood. Whatever he had to say, a gag silenced him. Good. Delicious, vicious vengeance sizzled on Eroan’s tongue. “Make him suffer.”

The man jerked his prisoner by his wrists. “My pleasure.”

Still, the dragon stumbled and twisted, bucking like panicked prey as he was led away. Dragons didn’t often experience the fear of facing their own deaths. That one would, and Eroan was glad for it. It was just a shame they couldn’t draw out his agony on this beach for days and weeks like the dragons would have with a captured elf.

A screech bore down on them from above.

“Go! Get inside! Do what we came to do!” Eroan barked. Eroan took Seraph from the man’s arms. “I’ll see to it she’s safe.” Seraph fell against him, so small and warm. His heart turned over, briefly choking him, and the strength that had kept him moving stuttered. He hadn’t expected this, hadn’t expected to see her again, and not here.

“It will be done, Eroan,” the warrior said. “There’s a forge inside, a weakness. If we can get there, we can break its channels and ruin this nest forever.”

“Do it. Kill any and all you come across.” He hugged Seraph close, vowing to keep her safe until this was done. “The bronze line falls this night.”

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CHAPTER 47



Lysander

THE BASTARDS HAD SHOT him at near point-blank range, gagged him, and dumped a bag over his head. The bolts had gone in and straight through, although one was lodged somewhere below Lysander's right rib. His body burned and twitched and bled. But that wasn't the worst of it. He'd heard the voice over the sound of the waves and the panting of his own breaths muffled inside the hood. He would have heard the voice a million miles away.

Kill him, Eroan had said.

He'd screamed through the gag for Eroan to listen, for them to take off the hood and just let the elf see him, but all it had gotten was a walk down the beach and a knee in the back.

Make him suffer.

Eroan hadn't known it was Lysander they marched to his death. But even if he had, would it have mattered? What had Lysander hoped for really? That Eroan would be pleased to see him, that the elf would just cast aside thousands of years of racial slaughter because Lysander had concocted some ridiculous romance in his head?

But to be so close and have him not know? He would have liked to tell that elf what he thought of him. That he admired him, loved him, even, for everything he was. For everything he could be.

That hurt more than all the wounds, more than his broken wing, more than his mother's cruel words. It hurt so much he didn't even care when the hood was torn off and the man saw the tears.

"Huh, dragons can cry..." He tore the gag free. "Anything to say?"

Lysander let some of the dragon rumble up his throat. "Fuck you, human. You think you can take me just because I'm—"

The man grabbed the bolt, the one sticking out from between Lysander's ribs and twisted. Pain exploded like a fiery ball eating him from the inside. A scream tore from him. He couldn't have stopped it, and among the towering rocks and crashing waves, nobody would hear. The pain didn't end though. It changed, morphing into a thick, drowning agony that tried to drag him into unconsciousness. If it went dark, he'd never wake again.

"I know Eroan! I know him! Tell him, just... tell him it's Ly—!"

The fist almost tore his jaw off, and Lysander hit the sand. His consciousness swam and the pain rumbled, or perhaps that was his own growl. The shift wouldn't save him, it'd just rearrange all the wounds, and it wasn't like he could fly off the beach. They'd kill him, as surely as this one was killing him now.

"I saved that elf!" Lysander groaned. "Tell him!"

The fist found his gut this time and mingled with the fire from the shifting bolt rubbing against bone. He tasted blood and spat somewhere toward the asshole beating on him. "He doesn't know..." Lysander saw stars. Real stars. He wanted to be among them again, soaring free. "He doesn't know it's me," he tried to shout it, but his voice was breaking, coming undone. "Tell him..." Words cracked, a sob breaking through. "Just tell him my name."

The man sank his fingers into Lysander's hair and grinned into his face. "He doesn't give a shit who you are, dragon. He wants you dead. Didn't you hear him? And he wants it slow."

Oh by the great gods, it couldn't end like this. He had tried to do the right thing, tried to be better, to just live and survive in a world that had tried to chew him up and spit him out. Didn't that count for something? Didn't any of it matter? What was the fucking point if he was just going to die here on this wretched beach having done nothing, leaving no legacy besides Lysander... the broken one. His mother was a bitch, but she was right.

The man freed a dragon's tooth knife and pointed the tip an inch from Lysander's right eye. He'd taken his mother's right eye too. Oh, how she would laugh now if she saw him.

"Do it!" he snarled. "You piece of human filth. You'll never bring us down. You can't because you're all the same. You hesitate, just like you're doing now, and when you hesitate, you die!" Lysander smacked his forehead into his, sending him sprawling against the rocks, and managed to fight his way to his feet when the son of a bitch rammed him, driving Lysander against a sheer rock wall lined with skin-tearing barnacles. Each one like tiny teeth ripping into his flesh. But pain, it was an old friend, one that wouldn't fuck off after the party was over.

The blade touched Lysander's neck, right below his ear. Only the person holding it wasn't the gnarled asshole but some woman with short hair and a snarl to rival any dragon's.

Lysander spotted the original human over her shoulder, dabbing at a bloody mess over his left eye. "Eroan said to kill him slow," the man said.

"Eroan doesn't command this crew," she replied, clearly in charge. "I do."

Lysander panted, pinned between her and the rocks. It was a good thing she was holding him up because he figured his legs wouldn't. The stars were back, only they weren't in the skies anymore, they were dancing around his vision, dragging the darkness behind them.

"There, you're not going to fight me, are you..."

Maybe she sensed the weakness in him. He'd heard humans didn't sense much of anything until their fate was almost upon them, but this one seemed to realize he was beaten. Maybe it was all the blood, or the shivering, or the fact he was having a hard time holding his head up, and her blade wasn't helping.

"What's your name, huh?" she asked, peering down her nose at him.

She smelled like the sea, although everything smelled salty, her scent was lighter, freer and so very human it made his mouth water, and the dragon in him wanted to burst free and tear strips off her.

If she wanted his name, she was going to have to keep him alive for it.

"*Putain, merde,*" she muttered. "You're not to kill him. I have a new home for this one." She eased off, and Lysander breathed in, setting his wounds on fire again, but at least he'd live. She smacked his head against

the rocks, and the stars were back, only this time, they swallowed him whole.

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CHAPTER 48



Eroan

THE TIDE of battle turned in the darkness. Eroan could taste it—more than that, he could *feel* it. And then the screeching caws sounded barks and whoops of the withdrawal. And screams. So many dragons screams from deep inside the warren. He listened as the night swallowed the sounds of the bronze abandoning their line. It shouldn't have been possible, the line had stood for a thousand years, but here they were, a handful of human prides with the right weapons and knowledge had done what none had been able to do in living memory.

“Victory...” he whispered, clutching Seraph closer. He'd tried to carry her back toward the shoreline, but after almost falling, he realized he was in no condition to try to clamber over the rocks alone, and so he'd sat and waited and listened and watched as the fruits of his work, as his dreams, had been made real.

Humans truly were remarkable. He *had* done the right thing bringing knowledge to them. He could return to Xena and Curan, Nye and Janna, look them in the eyes again knowing he was finally worthy of their admiration. The tide had definitely turned this night.

Debris had begun to wash up on the shoreline, and in the cresting morning light, the true cost of their assault began to wash up too.

Seraph stirred in his arms. He blinked down at her fluttering lashes and smiled into her sleepy gaze. "Hello."

It took her a moment to focus on him and then the jagged rocks lit by a blaze of morning sunlight. "Sassa? Where..." she croaked.

"You slept through a battle. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Her eyes widened. She reached up a hand. "Your head. Your hair! You look like you washed up here."

"I did."

She twisted, looking around with fresher eyes. "You... Er... you can put me down..."

He'd held her for so long he wasn't sure he could move his arms, but as a trail of humans snaked over the rocks toward them, he finally relented and set her down.

She swayed a little and took his hand. "Whoa. It's all right... I'm all right. I just..." She bowed over and gripped her thighs. "Maybe I do need a minute."

"I think you might have all the time you need." Eroan straightened as the returning gangs approached. He could smell hot iron on them and saw some were splashed with globules of what had once been molten but had cooled to a solid and singed their clothes. They'd found this forge one had mentioned.

"They're gone!" Jeremy was back, his eyes crinkled in glee. "They're truly gone!"

It seemed almost impossible. "How?"

"Part of their defenses had already been exposed and their response was sporadic like I've never seen from the bronze before. The big one, the brute, we didn't even see him. Once we found the forge rooms, most of the lowers had fled. We upset their molten tanks, flooded the place in molten rock. If they ever come back to it, they'll have to dig a whole new warren. For now, the entire line is undefended."

The elves could finally pass through the lines. Or the humans could come in force. Some of both. They could combine forces, build an army. This was everything he'd hoped for. Almost everything. His smile faded.

"How many did we lose?" he asked.

"Three ships went down, including yours. One is barely afloat. We should be able to limp it back. As for the people... we don't know yet."

But... they took dozens of dragons to their graves. Their sacrifice is not in vain. This is a new morning on a new era.”

More men and women spilled from inside the cave-mouth. Some wounded, and some carried the dead. Eroan’s thoughts sped up. He would return to the village, take Seraph, and rally more assassins. It had to be quick, the bronze would not abandon their warren for long if they thought it could be reclaimed. Bolstered by this success, the Order could take the fight inland to the tower.

He returned to Seraph and relayed the news. She lightly smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Perhaps news of returning home would rally her. He opened his mouth to explain his next plans, when Chloe called, “Eroan...”

She appeared with the same man who’d marched the dragonkin off hours ago.

“Wait here,” he told Seraph and met them far enough away that she wouldn’t hear how he’d sanctioned an execution. “Was it done?” Eroan asked.

“It was done,” she replied, face grim. “He won’t be hurting anyone ever again.”

Eroan nodded. He would tell Seraph later, when they were on the trek back home. “I must return to my village. With the line down, we can send messengers again, rally more to our fight. We must maintain the momentum.”

“*Merci beaucoup*, Eroan.” Chloe dipped her chin in thanks. “None of this would have been possible without you. I’ll be sorry to see you leave us.” She looked past him, out at the crashing breaks and two remaining ship masts. “I do not know if Gabe...” Her voice caught. “His ship went down. We’re scouring the shore, but there’s a lot of debris...”

Eroan’s duty to his people warred with wanting to help the humans. It seemed wrong abandoning them now. “I can stay, a little while—”

“Take the poor girl home and send a messenger when you can,” she smiled fondly and offered her hand. “It was an honor to fight alongside you, Eroan Ilanea. May this be the first step toward a human and elven alliance against the dragon blight.”

He took her hand, pride swelling in his chest. “May Alumn shine her light on you and yours.”

“Now, go take your friend home.” She sniffed and tucked her hands into her pockets. “Swift travels, elf.”



DANCING FLAMES LICKED at the campfire kindling. The wood was damp, but the fire had eventually taken hold, and they'd needed it. Winter was setting in, misting their breath, its bite sharp.

Seraph's silence was a concern. He watched her stare into the campfire flames now as though she were searching for something in their hypnotic motion. She would need time to recover from the bronze, time he'd denied he'd needed. He hadn't listened to the advice from Xena, from Curan, and knew she wouldn't either.

Not for the first time, he considered telling her how he'd had the bronze she was found with killed. Revenge like that might have given her closure or at least alleviate all those rotten and knotted feelings inside. He'd gotten his revenge on the bronze who'd threatened to rape him, but not the one from the dungeons, the one who'd left his mark all over Eroan's chest and back. And the one who had given that order. Akiem. He would taste vengeance again, one day.

He circled the camp, made from a small depression where a huge oak had fallen, pulling up its roots and breaking the canopy so stars sparkled above. Their small fire wasn't likely to attract any unwanted attention this far from any strongholds, but there was always a risk a wandering dragon might stumble upon them. "We should rest in shifts."

Seraph picked up a twig and tossed it into the flames. She hadn't heard. Eroan crouched beside her. He unclipped his sword and laid it next to hers. The two dragonblades looked right together, and it seemed fitting they should lie side by side now, as a pair, where they belonged. Seraph merely blinked at them.

"Do you want to talk?"

She looked up, tears shining in her eyes. Oh Alumn, he had to stop himself from pulling her close. He picked up a stick, tossed it into the fire, and watched the flames twist and warp it until nothing was left.

"After what they did to me, I tried to forget it, to deny anything had happened..." he swallowed. Then, feeling the cold, blew into his cupped hands before spreading them against the fire's glow. "It tore me apart until I had to tell someone, anyone... Those things I said to Curan—things you heard."

She looked up.

“As terrible as they were, they were true, and to speak them...” He winced and sighed, “It was painful to admit, but I’d been carrying all of that around and needed it out there. It lost me the Order, but I couldn’t have continued there as I was. I would have gotten people killed.”

“I need to tell you something,” she blurted.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, not until you’re ready. I understand, better than most.”

“No, I do, Eroan...” She twisted toward him. “I...”

The fire crackled. Wet wood hissed and popped.

Whatever she had to say, her glassy eyes shined in the dark. She seemed so small a thing to him now. He hadn’t protected her and he should have. He should have been there for her.

“It’s all right,” he said.

“No,” she sniffed. “You don’t... I don’t know how to say this.” She pulled her knees up and hugged them close.

“There’s nothing you can tell me that I don’t already know.” He met her gaze. One tear fell. “You survived, and there was a time that hadn’t been enough for me, but surviving what they do, it is heroic. Being a survivor, living with the pain, healing from it, it makes you strong. It takes time, but it will come. Trust yourself to heal and know I’ll be here for you. Always. We’ll get through this. Together.”

She brushed her cheek dry. “They didn’t hurt me. Not like... not like they did you. I mean, they would have...” She flicked her gaze down. “It’s not that anyway.”

She shook her head and threw her gaze up, toward the stars. More tears slipped from the corner of her lashes. Her bottom lip quivered, and Eroan’s heart ached for her. “After you left,” she said. “Curan did as you suggested. The assassins went out and harvested the teeth. We even got word to Cheen, but...” Her throat moved. She rested her chin on her knee and stared back into the fire. “The dragons saw a pride. They must have realized we were organizing. They followed and... and...” She hiccupped in and more tears fell. “Oh *Alumn*... there’s nothing left, Eroan. Nothing left at all. It’s all gone.”

His thoughts stalled, and he figured he must have heard wrong. “What did you say?”

“I wanted to tell you,” the words came in a rush now. “I wanted to, as soon as I saw you, but I couldn’t believe you were there, and then the

humans won their battle and I... I didn't want to take that away from you. You were happy like I haven't seen you happy in forever and I couldn't tell you, Eroan. I couldn't. And then... "The tears fell freely. "Today, all day, every step I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't get the words out—"

There was that darkness again, getting bigger inside, creeping through his veins like a poison. He listened, letting her words sink into his veins like the cold did, but sink deeper, into some part of his spirit—the part he'd always carefully guarded.

"We fought them, but there were too many. Nye... Nye got Xena out, and I was supposed to keep her safe. Just her. That was my job. I was supposed to protect her, and I failed." She sobbed, shoulders heaving. "The black dragon killed her and I couldn't do anything! If it wasn't for Lysander, I'd be dead too."

Ice. It was ice now, filling him up, cracking, turning him to ice inside. "Slow down. I... Seraph, look at me." She snuffled and gasped her short breaths, breaking apart in front of him. "Seraph." She jolted and stared wide-eyed. From all those words, from their terrible meaning, he gleaned one thing above all others. "Xena's dead?"

"They're all dead," she whispered.

No. That wasn't possible. He scrambled to his feet and paced to where the wall of oak roots reached outward like claws. "You're wrong. You weren't there? You said you weren't there. Nye had you leave..."

He'd left them, all of them, and the dragons had come. "Nye sent you away?" He asked, voice sounding distant like someone else was asking. "Then you don't know, you can't know what happened."

He'd left the village to save them and condemned them all instead.

Seraph's gaze tracked his pacing. "It was all on fire, Eroan," she whispered, words stammering from her shivering that had nothing to do with the cold. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The ice broke and fell away, and Eroan felt every shard, every jagged tip cut deeply, scoring his spirit open. Why would Alumn do this to him? Why would he go through all of this for nothing? "Please, Seraph... you're mistaken. You left. Some survived, surely?" He swallowed, and whispered, "Please... tell me some survived." If his home was gone, his people, then why was he even here, why had he survived?

"I... I suppose." She looked down and tucked her chin behind her knees, folding herself into a small ball.

There was a chance. A small chance. Curan could have gotten them out. The children... The assassin leader would have saved them. Just like Eroan should have.

He thrust his hands into his hair and laced them behind his head. Everything he had done, every sword he'd put in human hands, it had been for his people. So they might survive. And now...

He kicked at the root wall, thoughts coming undone.

They were dead. He knew it, knew it in his spirit. Dragons didn't leave elves alive. Ever.

Except one.

He turned his head. Firelight licked over Seraph's small frame. "You said..." His voice cracked. He tried again. "You said Lysander saved you?"

She nodded tightly.

"How?" How had the prince gotten involved in all of this when the last time Eroan had seen him, he'd been fighting Akiem? That was months ago. He tried to think, tried to recall their hierarchy, their plans... bronze lines, human attacks... Something about a bonding? "He was at the bronze line?"

"He..." she breathed in and puffed that breath out again to steady her voice. "He bargained with the bronze leader for me. He *saved* me. I mean, they... they tried to hurt me, but he was there and... I thought he just wanted me for himself but... he was nice, actually. For a dragon." Her lips hinted at a smile. "He talked about you." She smiled. "A lot. Like... *a lot*."

Eroan let his hands drop and fell back against the root wall. Dirt rained over him. He didn't care. Didn't feel. It was all too much. His village, Xena, and now... Lysander had been at the bronze line and the humans had attacked. Had he escaped? The prince was a survivor, like him, like Seraph. He would have escaped. "He saved you?" Why? Why did that prince keep saving elves? Was it something to do with the old dragon's words, how Lysander was a diamond in the rough? Why wasn't he like the others? And why, when Eroan thought of him, did all the emptiness and heartache thaw some?

"In the end, I... I couldn't take watching him suffer for me. The bronze leader, Dokul—he's horrible—he was going to... do things to Lysander. Bad things. At first, I thought maybe he wanted it, he seemed to want it, and then it all went wrong. Lysander had a firestarter tool. Kinda strange, for a dragon. I stole it, and I was going to ask him why he had it—"

Her words faded beneath the thudding in his ears, beneath the memory of him throwing the firestarter at Lysander's feet.

"You do realize, I'm a dragon."

"I'm done with being cold and wet, so if you don't mind..."

He remembered it so clearly. The campfire, like this one. The dragon prince, all cocky smiles like those smiles could paint over the hurt, but it always showed in his green eyes. "He asked about me?" Eroan heard himself ask.

"I wasn't going to tell him anything about you, but he wouldn't stop asking. When I overheard you and Curan, you said his name, said some... things about him. So, I thought maybe it would be okay to tell him, to make him a friend. I needed one in that place."

Eroan dropped a hand over his eyes. It was too much. Lysander had befriended her, kept her safe, but an ugly, gnawing, barbed thought had begun to dig at all the others. To dig and dig until he couldn't ignore it.

"I shouldn't have. I'm so sorry!" She thought his pain was her doing. "But he seemed so sincere—"

"It's not that." He bit into his lip and swallowed the rising knot in his throat, but he couldn't swallow the yawning dread consuming him from the inside. "How..." His voice came out raw, as raw as the feeling inside. The world was tipping beneath him, breaking, coming apart. "How did you get to the beach?"

He knew.

He knew what her answer would be. And he knew. He had done something terrible. Something unforgivable.

She answered, but her words were lost inside the storm inside him.

Kill him.

Make him suffer.

The dragonkin bronze found with Seraph. Not bronze at all, just a dragon out of place, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Eroan had condemned Lysander, the only dragon who had dared think differently, the only dragon who looked to heal instead of hurt, the only dragon Eroan had ever cared for.

Kill him.

Make him suffer.

And Lysander had heard those words. He would have known it was Eroan who had spoken them. The elf he'd saved time and time again had

ordered his execution. The prince had been so close. Just a reach away.

If Eroan could have seen his face, if he could have heard him speak, he would have known... He never would have let it happen, never would have said those things.

Why, Alumn?! Why have you done this to me?!

His legs buckled. His knees hit the ground. He fell onto his hands and sank his fingers into the earth as though he could dig his fingers into the hurt and rip it out. And it hurt, it hurt so much he couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, like his heart was a rancid, barbed thing and it was pumping more guilt, more rage through his veins. His village, his friends and now... Lysander.

Seraph threw her arms around him. She held him, rocked him, and said sorry until her voice failed, until she could only whisper the words. But she had nothing to apologize for.

"It's not your fault, Eroan..." she whispered. "It's not." She crushed him close. "Please don't blame yourself. Please... stay with me. I can't be alone. I need you."

Oh, but he did blame himself. How could he not? She didn't know what he'd done. But she would ask what had become of the dragon who carried her out of that hell, the one who saved her, and he would have no choice but to tell her: *I killed him. I made him suffer.*

"Our people died, but we won," she said. "*A new dawn rises and the age of the dragons will soon be over.*" Xena said those words, Eroan. They were her last. We won, and we'll keep on winning, but we need you." She took his wet face in her hands and stroked the tears away. "Eroan, I need you... Please... please be strong. Nye and Curan, they could be alive. We'll find them. And others too. This war needs you. We'll bring them down. All of them. Together."

Bring them all down... but one. The dragon with the green eyes and broken wing. The one who had dared think differently.

Eroan's heart broke into pieces, ripping shards of his spirit with them. Alumn had forsaken him. His village was gone. He'd failed. And he'd saved nobody but himself. He wished he could have saved one. Just one. The impossible dragon who had guided Eroan out of the dark.

CHAPTER 49



Lysander

LYSANDER PACED HIS CRAMPED CAGE. Whatever it had been before, the narrow bars and low top weren't built for a dragon his size. With every turn, his scales scraped the sides. But he did turn and pace because if he hadn't, he might have lost his mind while staring at the warehouse walls. As for stretching his one good wing... Impossible. Like these fucking humans were impossible. After the one known as Chloe had knocked him out on the beach, he'd woken up as human, bandaged, and shut in here. They'd rattled off question after question about amethyst mostly, about the tower, its defenses. On and on the questions had come and he'd ignored them all. He'd grown so bored of their twittering he'd shifted to dragon in front of them just to see them lose their tiny little human minds.

Half had fled and hadn't returned, but Chloe had stayed, and she had stared back at him. And that was all she did now. Stared. And he stared right back. He liked to click his claws at her and bare his teeth—teeth like those daggers she had clipped on her belt. He'd tried to light the place on fire, but the metal beams and walls hadn't burned. Figures. They were smart enough for that if nothing else.

Then the questions stopped. And the people stopped coming too and all Lysander could do was pace and turn, pace and turn. And dream of a

faraway freedom, one he'd never fully grasped, but vowed one day, he would.

On that day, he would soar again. And on that day, when it came, he would change the world forever, because if he'd learned anything from a stubborn elf, it was that he couldn't surrender:

Until it was done.



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CHAPTER 1



*Silver, Bronze & Gold,
The dragons of old,
The first to come,
Our world undone.
Betrayal and devastation,
Birthed a new creation,
The worst was done,
The Jeweled reign begun.*

~ Elven folksong

*L*ysander

“LET me out and we’ll call this an unfortunate misunderstanding.” Lysander added a teasing smirk, the kind that had won over countless dragons in the past. Unfortunately, Chloe was human, and currently standing on the outside of his cage with her eyebrows raised, clearly unimpressed.

“Or I’ll destroy this little rebel village once I *break* out. Let me out now and you have my word it won’t come to that.” It was a bluff, of course,

Lysander had thrown his weight at the cage bars, as man and dragon, and not a single one had shaken loose. Too narrow to slip through, too heat resistant to burn through. He'd tried it all. Bluffing was all he had left, and that didn't appear to be working either.

Chloe's lips thinned into the same judgmental line as her narrowing eyes.

Making a grab for her was useless. He'd tried that too. She was fast, for a human.

She finally managed a thin imitation of a true smile. "You'll have to promise more than that, dragon."

Chloe had a look about her that said she'd lived a long time on the fringes of war. Repair-patches dappled her trousers and shirt. Wrinkles and scuffs marked her boots the same way as they did her face, making her seem older than he suspected she really was. Even her hair was chopped off, having it out of the way her only concern. Her appearance spoke well of the hard woman behind it.

Lysander shifted his seated position against the back of the cage and spread his arms. "You want to take my boots too? Or the shirt off my back? I have nothing else to offer."

She huffed a dry laugh and muttered something in her native French language as she often did around him, knowing he had no hope of understanding. "You are the amethyst prince," she finally added, her accent sharp, making *the* sound like *zah* and *amethyst* sound sultry and exotic. "What I am seeing in you is not all you are capable of."

He dropped his head back and blinked through the bars above. If the cage wasn't enough, they'd built it inside a warehouse with only the smallest of narrow windows placed way at the top, near the roof. He couldn't see outside. Captivity hadn't been so bad to begin with. After all, it was just another cage, and he'd been raised in his mother's crushing emotional prison. But it had been days now, weeks even. They hadn't tortured him. He supposed that was a blessing, but boredom alone was its own kind of torture.

"You commanded the queen's monstrous flights," she continued. He ignored her, keeping his eyes up at the ceiling. "You've killed thousands, and I'm supposed to just believe you won't hurt us because of *your word*?"

She wasn't wrong. He had commanded the queen's flights. *Killed thousands* was a little overdramatic. These days, in the absence of humans,

his flights had mostly kept order among dragons, protecting the tower from the occasional wild northern interloper while occasionally dispatching any elven assassins venturing into the barrenlands.

Lysander pulled a knee up and picked at his boot. But that was all before his brother Akiem witnessed Lysander killing their mother, the queen. Everything had gone to shit since then. He'd practically handed the humans their victory on the beach, told them about the bronze forges they could use to ruin the bronze's underground warren, and at the time, he'd had every intention of giving himself up peacefully. They'd shot him, dumped a bag over his head and marched him to this one: Chloe.

"If you want out of this cage, you must give us more," she said.

In the beginning, he'd stubbornly refused to acknowledge her questions. But the cage had grown wearisome, and he had little love for his kin, so why protect them by keeping their secrets? Some amethyst he could stomach, some he even admired, but none had any love for him. These days, they'd all kill him on sight. Then there was Dokul, the bronze chief and his ruthless daughter, Mirann. Lysander had planned to manipulate them from inside their brood, but instead, had only managed to narrowly survive them. It seemed wherever he turned, dragons of all kinds wanted a piece of him, and he had no idea why.

He lowered his gaze. She'd stepped closer, this fierce human with her dragon-teeth daggers clipped to her belt. Daggers Eroan had taught them how to harvest and wield.

Thinking of the elf brought a twisted smile to his lips. He'd had a lot of time behind these bars to think of Eroan. If he hadn't let Eroan live, hadn't tried to save him time and time again, that elf would have died in the queen's bed and the elves wouldn't have learned how effective dragon-teeth were against dragonscale. The bronze wall would still be intact. If Eroan had died—as he'd seemed so determined to do—little would have changed. Elisandra might have still been alive. Or, had Lysander still snapped and killed his mother, he'd have fled to the bronze line where Dokul's brutal affections awaited. So, all things considered, maybe this cage wasn't so bad a place. Maybe he'd always been destined to end up right here, staring at the little human woman.

"I don't know what you expect from me?" he asked. "Anything I tell you, you'll assume to be lies..." They would never trust him. Then it struck him: He wasn't getting out of this cage. Ever. Only fools trusted dragons.

Rising to his feet, he approached the bars. Eye to eye with the human, she stared back, unafraid. “Don’t expect anyone to come for me, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

She glared back at him. He’d known members of his own flights like her. Utterly cold. Ruthless. She’d do whatever it took to save her people. He could admire that, one soldier to another.

“You’re their prince, their heir.” She tucked her thumbs into her trouser pockets. “They’ll come. And we’ll kill them when they do.”

Laughter tickled the back of his throat. He swallowed before it could burst free. “You grossly underestimate a dragon’s ability not to give a shit.” He leaned as close as the bars allowed and watched distrust shadow her eyes. She’d take one of those daggers at her belt and strike at him in a heartbeat, once she got her answers. “Nobody is coming for me. They’d all prefer I rot in this cage.”

Finally, some flicker of emotion darted through her gaze, briefly softening it before her guard slammed back up. “The old tales tell of how your kind took human form and infiltrated our ranks as spies, long before the world fell, when people still reigned from huge cities. Your kind made those people believe things. Some of my friends say *your* green eyes have magic in them. That you can make us believe things... Is that true?”

If he possessed that trick, then it was clearly broken, like the rest of him. Hypnotic gazes? Next she’d think he could turn into a snake and slither through the bars. He clamped his fingers around the bars and lowered his voice, adding a smooth rumbling just for her. “I hate to break it to you, but you caught the wrong brother if you want to lure my kin here. So do with me what you will. Let me out or let me die.” Pushing off, he backed away. She watched like she was waiting for him to reveal his true power. Like he was supposed to be some important dragon prince who had all the answers, the key to turning the tide in their useless war. By nights, they’d fucked up. Akiem was who they truly wanted. His brother always had been the center of attention, the one every dragonkin wanted to know, to serve. The *preferred* amethyst prince.

He whirled, sunk his hands into his ragged hair and kicked at the bars. For once, just once, before it all ended, he’d like to be the one in control of his life. He couldn’t remember a single moment in all his years when he’d been free enough to make choices. And now this place and these humans... were these four walls the last he’d ever see?

“What happened to your wing?”

The question whipped him around.

She'd moved up close to the bars, her human eyes softer than before. Lysander sprang off his back foot and lunged. He shot a hand through the bars and grabbed at her, but she darted away, barking an alarm. Her warriors poured in, their movement spilling into his peripheral vision. He knew what came next.

He let a growl rumble free. “Let me out now or I swear, when I do escape, I'll kill you all!”

“And that's the truth behind your lies!” Her icy glare locked with his. “You are never leaving this cage.”

He threw the weight of dragon behind his stare, darkening his presence with threat and subtly altering his appearance, adding a sharpness to his pretend human edges. He looked less like them now, less civilized, more *unknown*. She wanted the truth? The shift threatened to tear him open and fill the cage-space with a mass of enraged dragon. The humans saw it, saw the air ripple, felt the intangible magic surge, maybe even tasted its lemony bite on their tongues.

The sting of the dart jolted him from the madness. He tore the little feathered bolt from his arm and threw it back at them. Bastards. They'd started with the darts not long after he'd first shifted, after seeing a dragon up close had made them scurry into the shadows like the frightened mice they were.

His vision of Chloe swayed and tipped. The bars were the next to go. Darkness swirled. He was never leaving this box. He reached for those bars now, and missed, fingers sailing through the air until his shoulder hit hard iron instead. He couldn't shift now if he'd wanted to. All of him was drifting apart and sinking to where the dreams waited. His knees hit the ground, then a hand. He reached his other hand through the bars, so at least part of him was free when the darkness swallowed him whole.

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CHAPTER 2



Eroan

THE MASS of dragon had crashed through the tree canopy and slammed into the ground, heaving up a great blast-wave of roots and dirt. When they fell, they fell hard. Eroan regarded the dead amethyst in silence, his gaze sliding over its narrow snout and glassy, open eyes. Eyes easily the size of an elf's head. Blood and sizzling acids dripped from the gaping hole in the exposed firepit, low in its throat.

They'd been getting bolder, of late, and more reckless. Desperation, he guessed.

To his right, hidden in the brush, a huge ballista sat camouflaged among vines, hidden from above. Its enormous dragon-teeth-tipped arrow had been the end for this amethyst, striking it clean in the neck, tearing out its firepit and much of its throat, knocking it from the sky. The dragon had hit the ballista as it landed, by chance more than skill. The weapon would need fixing before its next use.

His pride of elves muttered their congratulations to the shooter, an Assassin of the Order, one of Cheen's best, as she had proven with this kill. She took the pats on the back and handshakes with humility and caught Eroan's eye for a few moments. He nodded once. The full celebration would come later, back in the safety of Cheen village. For now, the deed was done and the dragonkin had lost another of their number. Glittering

excitement shone in the eyes of his Order brothers and sisters. But more than that, honest hope. The tide of war was turning one dead dragon at a time.

“Take its teeth,” he ordered. “And be quick. Wolves will descend soon.”

The carcass would be ripped to shreds overnight and fully devoured within days. Should another dragon come looking, it would likely turn away from the stench of its fallen kin.

“We’ll fix the ballista tomorrow.” He turned from the dead beast and adjusted the dragonblade at his back. “Next shift, take your places.” Order assassins melted back into the shadows, unseen until it was too late if you happened to be dragonkin. His heart swelled at the thoughts of how things had changed in a matter of a few months.

Of course, it wasn’t enough. One village picking off two or three dragons wouldn’t make much of a dent in their numbers. All the villages should be doing the same. An organized force should be gathered, trained, educated with these new weapons, to make a push on the tower. Someone needed to be dispatched to Ashford to deliver the knowledge he’d gathered across the sea and rally the Higher Order into action. Eroan suspected that someone should be him.

“That was one of the biggest I’ve seen yet.” Seraph dropped from the tree canopy to the forest floor beside him and fell into step along the narrow, winding animal track. “Did you see its neck?” She made a clawing, sweeping gesture at her throat. “All gone. Nasty.” Her dark hair had grown out the last few months. She wore it in a high horse-tail, unashamed to bear the scar of her missing ear-tip.

Eroan made an agreeable sound, but his thoughts were still lodged firmly in the future, in responsibilities, in waiting for someone to step up, someone who wasn’t him. The last time he’d *done the right thing* he’d lost his home, lost people he cared about. His chest tightened. But change wasn’t happening fast enough.

Signs of an early spring poked through the undergrowth, green shoots through leaf litter, leaf buds swelling in the skeletal canopy above. More daylight hours meant more active dragons. The Order would need to prepare. The amethyst brood’s behavior had become unpredictable now their queen was dead. So far, their appearances had been sparse, but with winter fading, and the days growing longer, that would soon change.

Seraph hopped over gnarled roots ahead. Her sword sat neatly on her back, its handle poking above her shoulder. The twin to Eroan's. She never left her hut without it. The sight of it reminded him of everything he'd lost and the mistakes he'd made. Both swords had belonged to the only dragon he wished he hadn't killed. These blades were the very reason the elves had begun to make a difference.

Seraph fell back into step and beamed next to him, her teeth bright in the dappled and fading daylight. She thumped him playfully on the arm. "Smile, a dead dragon is a good thing. Your ballistae are working."

"It is," he agreed. "And they are."

"But...?" Her smile faded a little, but she clung to it, not willing to allow his sour mood to spoil hers.

"Nothing, I just... We can do more. We must do more."

"More?" she chuckled, "We've killed three in the last few weeks, that's more than we did in years back at..." The rest of her smile fell away, and her gaze fell to the forest floor, the word "home" unspoken.

Eroan didn't reply. Woodsmoke filtered through the trees. Cheen was close. Woodsmoke meant home, but after he'd returned from the bronze lines and seen what remained of his village, woodsmoke triggered different emotions. Ash and bone. Scorched, blackened earth where nothing would grow for years to come. The handful of survivors who had made it to Cheen described the dragon who had led the slaughter, a beast with scales of obsidian, as black as the night, eyes of gold. They hadn't seen the dragon until it was on top of them, and by then, it had been too late.

"Good hunting?" Janna's familiar voice rose above the others welcoming them back through Cheen's outer-barricades. He searched for her greenish-tipped blond hair among the barricade lines and spotted her toss a wave his way, her smile bright. He briefly nodded but slipped through the open gates quickly enough that she wouldn't be tempted to draw him into a conversation.

Seraph shot him an arched eyebrow. He ignored her too, although he'd learned ignoring Seraph led to more questions later. His student had become a friend after they'd survived the dragons together. That friendship loosened her tongue more these days than it had when he had been solely her Order leader and someone not to be argued with. It was Seraph's earring he still wore high up at the tip of his ear as a reminder of the time before.

Removing it hadn't felt right, despite its obvious twinkling disadvantage among the undergrowth.

"You should speak with her," Seraph suggested as they passed one of the central pathways linking the scattered huts. Cheen's layout appeared chaotic. Huts huddled along paths and beneath trees. Some stood on stilts, others seemed perched in trees, but the design deliberately sprawled to prevent dragon-fire from destroying everything in a few blasts.

"And you should stay out of my business," he grumbled.

"It's just... you were always so close."

Eroan shrugged off the sword and pushed through his door into his hut. The hearth was cold, the hut moreso. Seraph followed, immediately gravitating to the array of various shaped dragon-teeth scattered about tables and leaning against the hut's walls. She picked up a tooth with a serrated edge as long as her forearm. "That's a mean blade. You made all these?"

"Trying to." Eroan set his dragonblade against the hearthside and paused, his gaze drifting to the small window. Of course he should talk with Janna. The fact she was alive had almost brought him to his knees when he and Seraph had staggered into Cheen months after they were both presumed dead—again.

"It's that Ross, isn't it?" Seraph chatted idly. "He's nice. He fishes. He has a pet hawk. He's funny too—"

"It's not Ross," he cut off her Ross appreciation assessment before catching her wry grin, sensing he'd been played.

Maybe it was Ross. Ross and Janna had forged a bond since they'd fled the flames. She could do worse. Ross seemed nice. He wasn't a hunter or an assassin. But he did have a hawk. The male was harmless enough. Janna had found someone who could love her back the way she had always wanted, and that was the best he could have hoped for. Add to that her slightly rounded belly and it seemed better for them all that he stayed away.

"I overheard Xena talking about you once."

Eroan half-turned from the cold fireplace and regarded the young order assassin who had seen and endured more than most elves saw in their lifetimes. She'd been near death when the humans had found her below the bronze warren. Now, her face was flushed from a day in the winter sun, her eyes bright.

"Is there anything you don't overhear?"

She continued to examine his half-finished blades and shrugged. "Hut walls aren't thick. She said you were one of the best assassins she'd ever known, but you're terrible at being an elf."

He snorted. Xena had been full of little personal gems. She had liked to dangle cryptic bait and see who grabbed at it. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I wasn't sure until I got to know you. Anything outside of the order you're *krak* at."

He blinked at her. "Because there is nothing outside the Order."

"There didn't *use* to be." She dropped the knife and reached to open the drawer beneath the table.

"Hands off," Eroan warned. Her curious nature would get her into trouble one of these days.

Eyebrow arched, she left the drawer alone, leaned back against the table, and folded her arms. "Now there's plenty outside the Order. Now we don't just live to die trying to kill the dragon queen. She's gone." She shrugged again. "Now we live to fight back. Now... we *get* to live. Thanks to you."

He breathed in, filling his lungs, taking the time to filter out too many unwanted emotions. "You know exactly why you shouldn't thank me, Seraph." He'd been honest with her about everything. She was the only soul alive who knew it all. His failures, his disgrace. He hadn't been the hero they all believed him to be. If anything, that had been Lysander, the dragon prince he'd had killed on the beach. *Kill him. Make him suffer.*

Guilt and regret knotted low in Eroan's gut, making him want to curl around the pain. He turned to the cold hearth instead, and taking up a stick, poked at the ashes. Had he been alone, he'd have given in to the guilt and let it eat at his insides.

"I often think about him," Seraph said. "The dragon who saved me."

He paused and rested back on his heels.

"Do you think Lysander's still there with those horrible bronze? I feel like I left him somewhere terrible—"

"He's with his own." He stabbed at the burned bits of log, wishing he could stab at the memory of having Lysander killed. "Leave me, Seraph. I... I have those blades to heat and shape, and my shift starts at midnight. You should be well rested for your shi—" His hut door slammed, and with a labored sigh he dropped onto the floor.

Kill him.

Make him suffer.

Closing his eyes, he rubbed at his forehead, massaging away an ache. Alone, in a hut that didn't feel like his own and probably never would, he silently wished that moment on the beach had been different. If the humans hadn't used a bag to cover Lysander's head, if they'd let him speak, Eroan would have known who he'd condemned to death. He'd been so close... the prince who had saved Eroan, time and time again. The prince who had endured, who hadn't let his wretched existence beneath his tyrant of a mother beat him down. The prince who had saved Seraph from the worst they could do and saved Eroan in more ways than one.

A knot blocked his throat. He swallowed hard to clear it and opened his eyes, seeing only an empty hut full of shadows.

The past was done.

The future was where he needed to be.



INSIDE THE ORDER HOUSE, eight young elves, each clutching small dragon-teeth daggers, performed their routines. Curan observed from the back of the longhouse, his scarred face grim. He spotted Eroan and held up two fingers as a silent signal to wait. Eroan hung back, keeping to the edges of the house so as not to distract the group, but observed them each in turn. They moved in perfect harmony, each step smooth and precise. Sped up, these age-old sequences would kill. Eroan knew them like he knew how to breathe. A few of the trainees needed some polishing, but most were brilliant, as Eroan would expect of Curan's students. Eroan had been his student too, once.

With the sessions over, he greeted those who spoke with him until eventually the last had filed out, leaving Curan behind.

"They're ready for the field," Eroan said.

"Some are," Curan grumbled, turning away from Eroan to collect the students' wooden training weapons, replacing them on the racks. Curan wore his age well, although why he didn't join the elders, Eroan couldn't fathom. He'd earned that right years ago. Perhaps he and Curan were more alike than he'd realized.

“And they thought me a harsh teacher?”

“What brings you here, Eroan?” Curan and him... there had been some harsh words spoken, after which Eroan had left for the bronze front-line with no intention of returning. Curan had remained icy, and regarded Eroan now with cool, professional detachment.

Eroan guarded his heart against the inevitable hollow sense of losing his sassa—a teacher and friend he respected. “We should employ a messenger to take the ballista designs to the Ashford Higher Order.”

“It’s too risky this time of year.” Curan slotted one of the trainee’s wooden batons home in the rack with a dull *thunk*.

“If we wait until spring, we’ll have lost weeks of preparation time.”

Another *thunk*. “No.”

Eroan waited until all the weapons had been stowed and held the male’s gaze. It had been Eroan’s idea to collect the dragon-teeth in bulk, an idea Curan had argued against, saying it would alert the dragons to their presence. Curan had been right. The dragons had come and Eroan hadn’t been there.

“Cheen has good messengers,” Eroan persisted. The trek to Ashford was easily ten days through the dense forests. The journey would be a long and rough one, especially at this time of year when the weather could turn vicious. It was a risk.

Curan sighed wearily. “I said no, Eroan. Now, unless you have something else you need to speak with me about, please leave.”

His guarded heart ached. “I’ve made mistakes, I know that...”

Curan’s jaw ticked. “We’ve been engaged in open war with the dragonkin for countless generations. Waiting a few more weeks, until the days are longer, is the right decision. I do not have to explain this to you.”

“Dragons are more active when the days are longer.”

The older elf’s look soured. Eroan wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know. “The night I found you... the skies opened and dumped a month’s worth of rain in a few hours, do you remember?”

Eroan swallowed. He didn’t recall much of that night, he’d been too young and knew only that he’d been walking for what felt like his whole life, afraid and full of rage. His boots had been so wet they weighed as much as rocks and his clothes had rubbed him red-raw.

“You had a look about you, even when small, like you’d cut through anyone and anything which stood in your way.” Gentle fondness thawed

some of the coldness in Curan's gaze. "I knew then you'd be trouble, but the kind of trouble that makes an excellent assassin. You have one of the most ironclad stubborn streaks I've ever seen, but it drove you on when all others would have given in. You're a formidable male, Eroan, but I fear I was wrong in tutoring you."

Eroan winced. "You weren't wrong." Without Curan's guidance, Eroan would be nothing. He owed him everything, which was why that regretful look in his eyes cut him to the bone now.

"Then prove it. Be grateful Cheen's elders allowed you back into the Order. Had it been my decision, you'd be with the fisher-folk working the shores each morning."

The dry, shocked laugh escaped Eroan before he could stop it. "So tell them everything and see it done. I'll row a boat into the estuary each morning and catch fish for the rest of my days. Is that what you want of me? Is that all I'm good for?"

"Don't tempt me, Eroan. I know who you really are."

The words stung so badly they momentarily stole Eroan's voice.

He'd arrived in Cheen all those weeks ago and landed in his own myth. Of how Eroan Ilanea had risked it all to get the word regarding the dragons' weakness to their own teeth across the seas to the humans, of how the bronze wall had fallen because of his actions, of how he'd been there, on the ships, alongside the humans, shooting dragons from the skies. He had told Seraph everything in earnest, and she had quickly passed all that on, building him up. But Curan had known why Eroan had left, how his own self-hatred had driven him away, how inside he had *liked* what the dragons did to him. It wasn't heroism that drove Eroan, it was cowardice.

"We're grateful for everything you've done," Curan's tone dismissed.

"But it's not enough."

The old elf's eyes clouded with regret, then pity. "It's more than enough."

He snuffed his useless anger out. "Any word from the humans of France?"

"The last the elders heard was how they've captured a dragon." Curan puffed a small incredulous laugh. "I can't imagine how they've contained it."

Eroan remembered the cage he'd seen during his time with the band of human fighters from the outpost of *Le Touquet*. He'd learned much from

them. How to super-heat the teeth and fast-cool them, making them briefly brittle enough to shape, their ingenious ballista weapons, their motorized wheeled machines. Part of him wondered whether it would be better to return to them, but they were not his people, and they didn't need him quite like his own did. He had responsibilities here.

Things only he could do.

If Curan wouldn't send a messenger, Eroan had no choice at all. "You're right, it's too dangerous for a messenger." He headed for the door.

"Eroan?" Curan's voice stopped him. He turned to find too much emotion in his old teacher's face. "I don't blame you for what happened," Curan said. "I agreed to harvest the teeth. I was the Order leader. It was my decision."

Inside, guilt twisted like a clenched fist. Curan's words made no difference. Eroan's home and his friends were dead because of Eroan's choices. He nodded, appeasing Curan's guilt, and left before he had to listen to any more.



STANDING on a flattened branch forty feet off the ground, Eroan stared through the oak's naked branches at the crisp star-scattered sky above. The breeze was soft tonight, a whisper from the cooler east. Occasionally, distant owls hooted, and below his perch, mice rooted through dried, leaf litter. The weight on his soul lifted in the quiet forest. His muddled thoughts stilled.

Ashford. A ten-day journey if he traveled day and night. Cheen wouldn't miss him. The ballistae were in place and working. It made perfect sense for him to go now. What else was there here? Any elf could perform guard duty while he could be spreading the word, making a difference to other villages, rallying others to fight back instead of doing what they'd always done: hide, hoping never to be seen.

Generations before him, in a time when elves hid among humans, protecting them from the end of the world they never saw coming, they'd always been the hidden people. It was in their nature.

But times had changed. Hiding accomplished nothing but having the dragons pick them off one by one. He regretted his actions, walking away

from his home, leaving Curan with the task of collecting dragon-teeth. A task that had gotten elves killed. But without Eroan, the bronze wall would still stand, humans would still be assumed dead. Actions had consequences. And in war, those consequences were often costly.

Tomorrow.

He'd tell the elders of his journey tomorrow. They'd argue against it, but they wouldn't—couldn't—stop him. Most of them looked at him like he was some kind of mythical creature anyway. He'd done the impossible, survived the dragons—twice, brought them new weapons, killed a queen... He had more sway with the elders than most.

A different kind of rustle pricked his ears from behind. A muted noise. Almost too quiet to hear over the breeze. His lips lifted at one corner and he waited, eyes on the skies, until a heavy branch behind the tree's trunk groaned under a new weight.

"You moved from your usual post," a whispered male voice teased into his right ear. His smile grew and the smallest flicker of lust sparked low down, distracting his thoughts from tomorrow and leading them firmly into the current time.

Eroan leaned into the voice and without looking, whispered back, "I'm not making it easy for you."

Nye's laugh was dark and rich. "Oh, I've known that for a long time, *Eroan Ilanea*."

Warm fingers eased around Eroan's neck, settling at his nape. Nye's breath fluttered against Eroan's ear, tightening Eroan's lust with promises that touch would deliver on, kindling his need into a hotter and hungrier force.

Eroan dutifully kept his eyes on the sky as a warm mouth brushed his ear, then the wet tip of a tongue tickled, sucking the lobe between soft lips. Teeth nipped, eliciting a small, involuntary hiss from Eroan.

Nye shifted from a side-branch, filling Eroan's view. Dressed in all-black leathers with a few gray patches, Nye was a creature cut from the forest at night. Inky black hair fell to his jaw in messy angles, shorter than most preferred to wear it, accentuating a jawline Eroan stroked his fingers along now. Nye's eyes may as well have been dark too now he was all in shadow, but his crooked, knowing smile was bright and the points of his elven teeth sharp.

“My watch isn’t over,” Eroan said. *Regrettably*, he thought. He found himself fascinated by that smile and the lips forming it. Teasing, kissable lips.

Nye planted an arm against the tree trunk over Eroan’s shoulder, and braced himself, trapping Eroan between his chest and the tree. “There are others on-watch...” He plastered himself closer, nudging his knee between Eroan’s so all Eroan could feel was the warm, hard press of male.

He shouldn’t give in, but he’d stopped saying no when he’d found Nye had survived their home being razed to the ground. Nye had made the long, winter nights considerably more enjoyable.

“Hm...?” Nye’s query teased across Eroan’s lips, then the male’s hand dropped to Eroan’s hip and spread there, owning, teasing. Eroan knew that hand would soon wander inward to find evidence of his own wanting.

Nye turned his head, the line of his jaw twitching, and suddenly pushed off. “Or, I could just leave—”

Eroan hooked an arm around the male’s waist, tugging him back before he could escape. “You’re not getting away that easily.” The kiss was a claiming, Eroan’s hands on Nye’s face, his mouth taunting, opening, luring Nye in closer so there was nothing between them.

Nye shifted his hips, brushing against Eroan’s trapped arousal. Delicious friction sent a shudder through Eroan and dumped the rest of his reasonable thoughts from his mind. He sank his hands down Nye’s back and cupped his ass, grinding him in tighter. Nye threw his head back. The restrained groan that escaped him summoned a sly smile to Eroan’s mouth. He nipped at the male’s jaw and swirled his tongue down the column of his neck. Nye’s pulse fluttered against Eroan’s mouth, light and fast. Eroan mouthed that vulnerable spot, drawing a pleased hiss from between Nye’s teeth, his duty long-forgotten.

“You’re a bad influence...” Nye remarked, chest rumbling with the depth of his voice.

Eroan chuckled and Nye’s grip tightened on his hip. “You came to me,” he reminded. But maybe he *was* a bad influence. These moments they had recently stolen together, moments during Order duties... He would never have discarded his duty like this before. And then continue to neglect the way of the Order to chase personal pleasures. But life was too short to squander it. A dragon prince had taught him that.

If they were caught, they'd both be out of the Order. The risk made Eroan want to turn Nye around and take him hard against the tree, raw and unprepared. The thought alone sent a throbbing pressure to his arousal and peeled a telltale growl from the back of his throat. Nye shifted back enough to spread his hand over Eroan's trapped cock. Eroan tensed, but only because he needed to control the pace or else this would get noisy real fast.

Nye's mouth captured his, sweeping away his tight, panting noises.

When he withdrew, leaving Eroan breathless, a lustful wickedness flashed in Nye's eyes. He liked this. Liked it a lot, if the bulge in his trousers was any indication.

Nye lifted a finger and pressed it to Eroan's lips. "Quiet..."

Eroan nipped at his finger, enough for Nye to yank his hand back. Nye's footing slipped. His eyes widened.

Eroan swooped an arm in, scooped him around the waist, and swung him against the tree, saving him from falling. And now it was Eroan's turn to brace an arm behind Nye's shoulder, smothering the male, trapping all of him.

Nye's rich, nervous chuckles must surely have been designed to torment because hearing them made Eroan's throbbing, aching need turn maddening. He loosened his grip on Nye's waist and traveled his hand to the hard ridge inside Nye's trousers. Nye's smile vanished and his eyes widened for a different reason. He liked to be caught.

"You seem to be in *need of assistance*," Eroan whispered against his cheek. He leaned against his side, leaving enough room to pop open Nye's belt's toggle buttons. Nye trembled beneath his touch. Drenched in a visceral want, Eroan took Nye's arousal firmly in hand and eagerly stroked. Nye's entire body hardened, pulled taut like a nocked arrow. Eroan made sure to brush the silken head with his palm as he sank his fingers lower, circling and caressing warm balls.

Nye dropped his head back, surrendering. Dark lashes fluttered closed. Eroan would have liked to have dropped to his knees and take him in his mouth, but a tree branch forty feet off the ground was not the best place to go down on Nye—they'd both most certainly fall. But by Alumn, he wanted to bring him to the edge and hold him there until Nye begged him for more.

Nye's smooth pre-seed moistened Eroan's strokes. Nye's lips parted, his breaths hastening. All signs that heightened Eroan's desire.

He bumped his chin against Nye's and whispered into the corner of his mouth. "I want you in my bed where I can spread you without falling out a tree." With every word, he caressed Nye's taut erection, sweeping wetness off the slit with his thumb. Shudders spilled through Nye. His sharp little teeth bit into his bottom lip and Eroan's own arousal throbbed hotter, aching for attention.

"I'd never make it." He opened his eyes, dark pupils swelling.

"No?" Eroan tightened his grip and Nye's hand shot out to clutch at Eroan's shoulder, fingers digging in. Their gazes locked, Nye's full of half-lidded desire. All the silent glances, the lingering looks—unanswered questions had always simmered between them. Eroan had pushed them aside once, but not anymore. He needed to be loved, to be with someone, to chase the past away. When alone, his failures stalked him. He couldn't be alone.

Eroan shifted his grip, curling his fingers around Nye's erection again, trapping his prey against the tree. Nye's body heaved against his, his breaths panted close to Eroan's ear. He writhed and twitched; wound so tightly he would soon come for Eroan.

An unfamiliar noise barely registered through Eroan's scorching lust. His instincts ticked, distracted, until Nye's free hand clutched at Eroan's forearm, trying to slow him, to control him. None of that was about to happen. Eroan had him completely at his mercy.

The same unusual noise whispered in on the breeze again and this time Eroan's instincts chimed louder. He'd heard it before, many times, like sheets drying in the wind... but strange to hear it in the forest. *Wrong*, his instincts told him. *Out of place. Danger.*

There. Again.

Eroan abandoned Nye's arousal and clamped his hand over Nye's mouth. The male's eyes shot open, pleasure quickly veering toward alarm.

Eroan shook his head.

The breeze stirred a few dried leaves below. A fox screamed somewhere far off. And there, that sound: sheets flapping.

Nye's eyes widened.

Eroan slowly, quietly, turned his head. Naked winter branches clawed at the night sky. Stars silently flickered. But as Eroan scanned the dark, some stars vanished and reappeared.

It wasn't sheets he heard, but wings.

Enormous wings designed for near-silent flight, belonging to a dragon as black as night and almost invisible in the dark.

Akiem.

Eroan's heart stuttered. Memories fought to undo his control. It couldn't be the prince. Not here, not now.

Panic plucked at him. The dragon's golden eyes, his deep, smooth voice ordering Eroan's torture, the blast of dragon-fire in the queen's tower that had almost consumed him. But more than all of that, Akiem had destroyed his home, killed people he'd loved, taken Seraph and Xena to the bronze. Akiem was everything Eroan despised, everything he was forged to kill.

Nye shifted, trying to close his fly. Eroan gave him the barest of head-shakes, mouthing, "No." Any movement would be seen from above. With any luck, if they stayed still and silent, the dragon would grow bored searching for its prey and move on.

Unless he had already seen them.

Wing beats thumped. The downdraft began to whip up dried leaves and grit from the forest floor, whisking the debris into a storm. The dragon was descending.

If it was Akiem, they wouldn't stand a chance at surviving what came next. Eroan looked up, into Nye's eyes. "Run."

Eroan dropped from the tree, landing in a crouch and springing into a run with Nye a blur to his right. The dragon let out a howling roar so loud it thundered through Eroan's skull. A warning cry. Other dragons would hear it and come.

Eroan's thoughts raced. *No, no, not again...* Cheen needed to be protected. He would not be the cause of more elven deaths.

Eroan ran, carving through the spindly brush, legs and lungs burning. Nye was a blur just off to his right, and then he was gone, having veered off toward Cheen.

"No!" Eroan barked. The dragon above screamed its rage at having its prey split up.

The wind tossed branches and dirt into a swirling wall, raining grit into Eroan's eyes, but still he ran. "Not Cheen!" he yelled. That's what the beast was waiting for, why it hadn't blasted them with fire. For them to run back to Cheen, to lead it straight to the village. Akiem was smart. Eroan hadn't forgotten that. Hadn't forgotten any of it.

A branch thrashed him in the cheek. He raised an arm, fighting through, and spotted Nye, heading back in. Nye's quick glance flashed understanding as he dashed over roots just ahead of Eroan and down hollows. Eroan whistled through his teeth and took an old animal track heading far away from Cheen. Nye followed. A ballista station was up ahead. The Order assassin manning it would have heard the dragon's cry and be searching the skies for the beast. If Eroan could lure Akiem in range...

Night fell from the skies, dropping a wall of smooth black scales into Eroan's path. He skidded to a stop and flung out an arm, blocking Nye from plowing ahead. Vast jaws opened, exposing glistening racks of curved, brilliant white teeth. Golden eyes glowed, as large as two suns, and the dragon's wings spread like enormous ship sails.

The glowing, churning firepit low in Akiem's long neck drew Eroan's eye. Behind obsidian scales, the fire glowed a rich purple—amethyst. Akiem's shallow, soulless eyes trained on Eroan and flickered with recognition. His lips drew back in a smile or a sneer—this close, Eroan couldn't tell. Akiem remembered too. He huffed, blasting Eroan with hot, wet air.

"Go," Eroan urged Nye under his breath, holding the dragon's glare.

Akiem's broad, crowned head cocked one way, then the other—a hunter sizing up whether its tiny morsel was worth the effort.

"No," Nye hissed back.

"Go." Unable to look, to force the order home, Eroan silently willed Nye not to be a fool. But Nye's presence lingered in the corner of Eroan's eye. He was going to make this difficult. "He wants me," Eroan said, keeping his voice low, hoping Akiem wouldn't hear under the sound of his own bellows-breaths. "Go, he won't follow. If other amethyst arrive, they'll hunt us to exhaustion. Go now, while you can."

"I'm not leaving you." Nye's growl held its own dangerous edge.

"You're an Assassin of the Order." Eroan's snarl tightened. "Do the right thing and *leave* while you can!"

Akiem breathed in, expanding his vast chest and rumbled something that sounded like a deeper, foreboding warning.

He has our scent. A body of water could shake him off their trail, but there were no rivers nearby, unless they made it the few miles to the estuary. Akiem would kill them before then. They'd be lucky to make it half a mile.

Eroan broke eye contact and swung his glare at Nye. “*Damn you, Nye, go!*”

The male snarled back, dragon-daggers in-hand. “Never!”

The passion and defiance burning in Nye’s gaze tripped Eroan’s fierce instincts to protect. If Nye wanted to die here, so be it. Dying was, after all, what Order assassins were good at.

Eroan plucked the dragonblade off his back, stepped forward, and lifted the sword, showing it to the beast. Akiem's head lifted. His eyes sparkled at the sight of a sword he surely recognized.

“You want to finish what you started, dragon?” Eroan flicked the fingers of his left hand behind his back, signaling to Nye to take the animal track behind them. “You’ll have to catch us first,” he grinned and bolted onto the track, Nye a shadow beside him.

The ground rolled, dipped and climbed, through roots and brush and gullies. Anything outside the track fell away and all Eroan could see was the next turn, the next tree he had to careen around. Faster and faster. His chest burned. Ahead, large evergreen pines hid their retreat.

He could no longer hear the dragon, but it didn’t matter, Akiem had their scent: hiding from sight wasn’t enough.

“Where... are... we going?” Nye panted.

No time to answer. Returning to Cheen was out of the question, the coast was too far and with no water nearby, there was only one way out of this, and even then, it may not work.

Another dragoncall shattered the quiet and moments later, another boomed, answering from a distance. Akiem screeched, just meters above. The fine hairs on the back of Eroan’s neck prickled. *Too close.*

He glanced back. Nye had fallen behind.

Fire flooded the sky and sizzled down the evergreens, backlighting Nye against purplish flame. Pine needles popped, hissed, and spat. Tall, thin shadows danced around the forest floor. Akiem didn’t yet know where they were. The flame was meant to flush them out.

Nye put on a burst of speed. Ahead, the purplish firelight illuminated the dragon carcass from earlier in the day, still lying where it had fallen. In the hours since their absence, something had torn the beast’s middle open and spilled its pink insides across the ground. Eroan looked to the skies. Either Akiem would see them or he wouldn’t, there was no other option. Vaulting over one of the dead dragon’s forelegs, he skidded on the slippery

entrails and scrambled toward the gaping, torn belly, now bloated with decay. Parts of the rib cage shone white among the gore, but the cavity was intact. Eroan took his blade to the belly-scales, thrust the sword in and tore through the flesh, ripping open the hole large enough for two. He lifted the two-inch thick skin, opening the hole wider. Nye, without a second's thought, plunged inside.

Eroan climbed into the dark, slippery, stinking hole. His stomach flipped, trying to heave up a stench so thick it painted his throat and lungs. He smothered his mouth and nose in the crook of his arm and leaned back into the curved inner ribs.

His eyes streamed, wetting his face. Squeezing them closed, he buried himself in the mind-space he'd used in the tower dungeons, the space that carried him away to a home that no longer existed.

Nye's hand nudged at Eroan's knee, then his thigh, until he finally landed on his hand. Nye's fingers squeezed closed. Eroan squeezed back, hoping to alleviate some of Nye's shuddering. And they waited in the dragon's belly for Alumn to decide their fate.

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CHAPTER 3



Lysander

“YOU SAID none of them would come for you.”

Chloe was looking smug today. Lysander returned her grin with a droll look of his own and went back to stewing in silence. Outside of a few insults and some colorful threats, he’d done nothing to these people and still they treated him like an animal. Perhaps he shouldn’t have threatened to roast them all. They seemed a little sensitive to the thought of him eating them.

Humans tasted like chicken, or so he’d been told. Unlike his ancestors, he’d never eaten one to know for certain. The thought brought a smile to his lips. Maybe he would have, had he been hatched in another time, when the humans were everywhere, like ants. Elisandra had told him humans were a delicacy and hard to come by. There wasn’t much meat on Chloe. She’d probably be all gristle and bone. And bitter. Definitely bitter.

She crouched outside the bars, bringing her eye level with his seated position at the back of the cage. “Where was the big bronze when we attacked the line?”

He dropped his head back against the cold iron and closed his eyes. More questions. Always with the questions. He’d tried asking about her. Did she have any family, any little kits, but she’d blanked him with her hard eyes.

“We thought it strange their chief wasn’t there. A stroke of good luck for us. So where was he?”

These questions were new, but why bring up Dokul’s absence now? What was her angle? Since the bronze line had fallen, they hadn’t seemed that interested in the chief’s brood or their defenses. They’d wanted to know about the tower, about the number of amethyst flights.

“How should I know where he was?” he grumbled, keeping his eyes closed. If he stared into the dark long enough, he could pretend there was no cage, pretend he was free to stretch his wings, even broken as one was. Gods, he wanted to shift and stretch every muscle from nose to tail and maybe roll around in the dirt to get the smell of human off him.

“Maybe you can tell me that?”

He sighed, his fantasy no good if she was going to keep twittering. He opened one eye, squinting at her. “Like I told you, I’m a nobody. In fact, you talking to me is the most attention I’ve been given in... since I can remember.” Both eyes open now, and her smirk still there. “You haven’t tried to fuck me or kill me in all this time, this cage is a fucking paradise.” Her little human nose screwed up at his crass language. As her smile died, his grew. “Maybe you should come in here and rough me up a bit, huh?” He let his smile slip sideways and lowered his lashes, turning up the heat. “Make me feel at home?”

Her top lip curled. Disgust. That was rich, seeing as she was the one keeping him here.

“If you’re a nobody, why is the bronze chief searching for you?” she asked, her strange lyrical accent thickening.

Lysander’s smile cracked. “What?” His heart thumped a little harder. Dokul was actively looking for him? His heart stuttered.

She nodded. “He’s hunting for the dragon we took from his beach.”

His lapse in guarding his expression only lasted a moment. He plastered his smile back on his face and waited for his heart to slow its racing. “He’s called Dokul and he’s not a dragon you want to fuck with.”

“The last of the first metal dragons. Yes, we know of Dokul. We’ve spent the last few decades studying him in fact. He wants you back enough to use his human appearance to try to infiltrate us and get answers. Unfortunately for him, he’s as distinctive as human as he is as dragon.”

A huge, hairless brute of a male with a fondness for battered metal armor did tend to stand out among these little cloth-wearing humans.

Lysander recalled the smell of him. Wet metal, like blood. He could taste him too, warm and salty. It was only the young elf, Seraph's, intervention that had saved him from Dokul's rabid affections.

"He destroyed one of our northern-most camps when he didn't get his answers," she continued.

Dokul wasn't the problem here. The humans knew his appearance. He wouldn't be getting any information from them. No, it was Mirann they should be more concerned with. If Dokul was looking for Lysander, then so was his daughter and she could slip among their number like a snake in the grass. He looked at the warehouse door. She could be right outside now.

If Mirann found him first, she'd release him, but kill everyone here. If Dokul found him... He'd probably fuck Lysander in the cage and make the humans watch, then kill them all, including Lysander. Either way, Chloe and her little group of rebel fighters were living on borrowed time.

"Say this Dokul learns of my location and he comes here," Lysander swallowed. "How do you intend to kill him?" He kept his tone light, hiding the creeping sense of panic.

"We have our ways." She smirked, her accent potent.

Shooting a few unprepared bronze dragons out of the skies was one thing, stopping a dragon like Dokul and an organized flight was entirely another.

These humans were all dead and Lysander was stuck in a cage like the pet Dokul and his daughter had made him out to be. This Chloe thought she was smart, but she had no idea the lengths Dokul would go to.

He suddenly knew how this would all end and it wasn't the way she hoped. "You're making a mistake. You should let me go and save yourselves the pleasure of Dokul's company. He'll follow me away from your camp."

"We should, huh?" She stood and brushed down her trousers. "Of course you would say that."

He fake-grinned back. "Just trying to help you live, seeing as there aren't many of you left."

"We might surprise you, Lysander *Bronze*."

Ah, so Dokul had let that little name-change gem drop somewhere the humans could find it. Wonderful. Now how was he going to argue he no more wanted Dokul here than they wanted to die anytime soon. "Lysander

Bronze,” he repeated, chuckling to himself. That horrific spectacle of a coupling with Mirann still hurt him, even now.

“You said you were worthless, but it seems it’s your lies that are worthless.”

He didn’t watch her leave, just stared through the bars at the warehouse wall. If he didn’t get out of the cage, the bronze would come, and while he could manage Mirann for a while, Dokul was another matter. Lysander hadn’t intended to leave the ancient dragon with a new smile in his throat and his own cock in his hands, but then, he hadn’t intended to get caught handing over an elf to the humans either.

And even if he did get out of this cage, then what? It wasn’t as though he could conveniently fly back home. And it was a long fucking walk.

What was there for him to go back to anyway? Everywhere he looked, the cage bars closed in.

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CHAPTER 4



Eroan

“WHAT IN-THE-NAME-OF-ALUMN HAPPENED TO YOU?” Curan barked as Eroan trudged through Cheen’s gates. In the crisp light of dawn, Nye beside him looked as though he’d been chewed up and spat out. Eroan could only assume he looked as wrecked and smelled as revolting as Nye did.

“We had an encounter.” Eroan flicked something wet and sticky off his fingers. His face itched, and when he scratched at it, brown mucus flaked off, embedding under his nail.

Nye fidgeted, lips turned down in a miserable grimace. Blood and dragon-innards had dried in his hair and coated his neck. Crusted bits of things Eroan couldn’t identify stuck to his leathers. Nye crunched as he walked.

“Can we get cleaned up before you start with the questions?” Eroan asked Curan.

“Where’s the dragon now?” Curan asked Nye, deliberately avoiding Eroan’s glare.

“Gone.” Nye licked his lips. Grimacing, he spat to the side. “We waited it out. Cheen’s safe.”

Curan considered them both long enough for the warmth of the sun to soak through Eroan’s clammy leathers and lift more sickening odors into

the air. If Eroan didn't know better, he'd think Curan was punishing them, but the male had never been petty. Still, things changed.

Finally, Curan gestured for them to leave. "Go, get cleaned up, but I want a full report as soon as you're ready."

They attracted a few stares as they headed across the village. The young ones pointed and giggled. Nye tossed them a wave, sending them into fits of more squealing. It wasn't every day a pair of assassins returned covered in dragon entrails.

"Come by my home." Eroan nodded ahead. "I have hot water."

"*Hot* water, huh?" Nye grinned. "I'd kill for that."

Slipping ahead to follow the winding paths through the trees, Eroan led him to his hut. Inside, he stoked the embers in the fire-grate back to life and tossed on a few more logs. "Give it a while to heat the water."

"What's this?" Nye eyed the pipe jutting from a raised steel tank, running around the top of the walls and down into what looked like a closet.

"A rain closet. The water heats up, runs through that pipe and comes out the head in there."

"You learn this from the humans?" Nye asked.

"Some of it." Eroan stood by the fire and carefully plucked off his ruined jacket, trying to minimize disturbing the gunk. "I added a little modification."

Nye opened the closet door and eyed the small rain-room inside. "Is there enough water for two?"

"Just one... You go first." Eroan dumped his jacket by the front door in a pile he'd later toss out, and tore his undershirt off, over his head, dropping that onto the pile too. It would all need to be burned. Sinking his fingers into his hair, he tried to run them through and snagged on solid chunks that had his gut tripping over itself again.

"That was quick thinking... last night," Nye said behind Eroan. His jacket landed on the pile, then his shirt, and as Eroan turned, Nye flicked open his trouser fastenings and pushed the trousers down over his hips. He kicked them off, leaving him virtually naked. Just a pair of loosely slung underpants covered him. Blood streaked his lightly muscled chest, but not as much as had dried on his forearms and face, anywhere exposed to dragon insides.

Nye blinked, and Eroan realized Nye was waiting for him to say something. Had there been a question? Because all his thoughts had ground

to a halt when he turned to find Nye naked and bloody. “The er...” He cleared his throat and tried again, “It was the only way to mask our scent.” He worked at his own trouser fastenings, trying to think around the temptation standing just a few feet from him. Nye’s gaze tracked him, making his skin heat. The truth was, he hadn’t known if hiding in the carcass would work. They both could just as easily be dead. Akiem was no foolish lower. And he wouldn’t give up tracking them either. Now that he knew Eroan was alive, he’d likely be back. And he’d keep on looking until Cheen was discovered. Eroan needed to think of a way to stop that from happening.

Nye’s fingers settled on Eroan’s at his belt, prompting him to look up. His thoughts had been so lost in Akiem, he hadn’t seen Nye close the distance between them. He wasn’t even sure if Nye had said anything, though from the pitying look on his face it seemed likely.

He’d thought he’d gotten over his ordeal at the tower, thought he’d hardened himself to the past, but now he could feel the horror of it all creeping back in like a phantom in the dark.

Eroan caught Nye by the back of the neck and pulled him chest to chest, planting a messy kiss on the male’s wet mouth. He tasted of all things Nye, but also the saltiness of dragon, of blood, and that lemony bite of dragon magic. The myriad of scents wrecked his restraint. Sudden, scorching lust ripped out all thought. He wholly needed Nye beneath him.

Nye gasped and gently pushed at Eroan’s chest. “Eroan Ilanea, I love you, but you smell like a dragon vomited you up.” He laughed, dragged Eroan by the wrist toward the little shower room, and shoved him inside. “Get in the hot rain already.” Grabbing the dangling rope, he pulled, dumping hot water from the makeshift rainhead above over Eroan’s head and shoulders.

Eroan hissed at the sudden sensory blast, grabbed for the still-laughing Nye, and pulled him inside the tiny space before his wretched memories could sink their claws in. Nye let out a very un-male-like yip and laughed harder, wet and writhing in Eroan’s hands. The sight of Nye—hot water streaming through Nye’s hair and down his face, plastering dark cow-licks to his cheeks—entranced Eroan. Nye lifted his face, letting water wash off the dirt, inviting luscious thoughts Eroan quickly lost himself in. He kissed Nye’s neck, unable to resist—tasting water, blood, dragon, and elf—and mouthed down to his collarbone. Nye sucked in a breath and clutched at

Eroan's upper arms, either holding him back or holding him still. Eroan's already racing heart thumped harder, driving hot blood through his veins. He wasn't going to be able to play games, not now, not after last night. He needed the old memories gone, smothered beneath the hard and soft feel and sweetness of Nye on his tongue. Nye's hands stroked over his chest and down his back, pulling him close.

Nye's back arched, hips pushing, and Eroan answered that need, cupping Nye's erection through his sodden undergarments. The fabric became too much a barrier. Eroan tugged the cloth free, Nye's scandalous mouth attacking his. Cotton ripped. Eroan had Nye's hot, hard need in his palm. The male groaned into Eroan's mouth and Eroan took it in, took everything Nye gave, knowing his grip was too hard, his fingers too deep, but unable to loosen any of it.

"Eroan..." Nye reached between them, angling for Eroan's trapped arousal. "Let me..." Nye's words clipped off. He lifted sultry eyes and whispered, "Won't you try it?"

Eroan batted his hand away, shoved him back against the shower's flimsy wall, ravaged his mouth, and danced a trail of biting kisses down Nye's chest. Nye wanted Eroan beneath him, something Eroan had never allowed and wasn't about to start now. Eroan dropped to his knees, taking Nye between his lips and in deep, as he'd wanted to at the tree before Akiem had ruined the opportunity.

Nye's hands speared into Eroan's hair, fingers twisting. The male muttered words scattered between groans, but it wasn't enough. Eroan needed to hear him cry out, wanted to bring him to the edge and hold him there until it *hurt*. He angled Nye's arousal against the roof of his mouth and slid the head back, deeper, before withdrawing, curling his tongue, listening to Nye's ragged breathing and nonsense words.

Nye's thigh, trapped beneath Eroan's steadying hand, tensed as hard as rock. His hips rolled, thrusting his erection deeper, faster. Eroan took it, teased it, rolled and worked his tongue until Nye's shudders betrayed him, revealing how close he was to the edge. Eroan straightened, licking his way up, over Nye's solid abs. He twisted Nye by the hips and spread his ass. Nye braced an arm against the wall, back arched. Water beat against Nye's tableau of golden muscles. Eroan might have explored that back if the demand to take hadn't been driving him out of his mind. Inserting a finger, testing the resistance, Nye groaned, and lust sparked through Eroan's

arousal. He tore at his own trouser fastenings, took his swollen erection in hand and guided its head against Nye's hole, barely managing to hold himself back from thrusting too deep, too fast. The wetness helped ease the tightness. Eroan slowly pushed in. Pleasure crackled, the tightness a direct link to that part of his mind that shattered into raw, unthinking pleasure. Reaching around Nye's hip, he stroked Nye's erection, finding it still deliciously hard and Nye just as open and wanting as before. Then Eroan eased deeper, hips driving himself into the tight, muscled sheath. Erotic sensation shivered through him and he thrust, losing control. He wasn't going to last and didn't care. He chased the pleasure, slowing only when he feared he'd lose himself too soon. When Nye spat a curse and his ass, cupped against Eroan's thighs, clamped, Eroan fell forward against Nye's back and hastened his pumping on Nye's cock until the male lost control. Nye cried out, losing his seed into Eroan's hand.

Eroan's restraint broke. He owned Nye by the hips and fell into the rhythm that drove all the madness away and dumped him somewhere filled with numbing pleasure and nothing else. The cresting release loomed, too soon, too close. Tight, aching need spooled closer, building, rising. It snapped. Eroan threw his head back, teeth clenched, and groaned out as the unspooling release broke him, momentarily shattering coherent thought, setting him free from the guilt, the memories, the hurt, the wrongness of his own mistakes.

All too soon reality began to seep back in, leaving Nye a shuddering, panting wreck in his hands.

"I hurt you?" Eroan pulled back. He should have slowed, should have been gentler. Nye was smaller, in many ways softer. By Alumn, since his return from the tower, his mind had been harder, his wants sharper. "I'm sorry—"

"No." Nye caught his hand and threw a look over his shoulder, lashes low, smile slanted to one side.

Eroan withdrew with a small, shivering gasp as the dregs of pleasure finished him off and Nye turned in Eroan's loose grip. His half-smiling mouth brushed over Eroan's, mingling their racing breaths. "Didn't you say something about a bed?"



NYE LAY PRESSED against Eroan's side, his head pillowed on his chest, an arm slung over his waist, a leg hooked over Eroan's. Moments ago, someone had knocked on the door, but with no answer, that someone had taken off again. Seraph or Curan, Eroan assumed. Curan probably, or one of the Order on Curan's order to find where they'd both gotten to.

"I used to daydream about moments like this," Nye said, his voice low and hoarse. Hearing the gravel in it, Eroan wondered about the thickness of the hut walls and if anyone had heard them. "You remember when we were young... You were always so focused. Even back then. Any task, no matter how small, you threw yourself into it. You beat me at *everything*."

Eroan remembered Nye's scowling face every time he'd finished second in a race or was second back to the Order house after a night's scouting. Always second place. Eroan smiled at the memories and circled his fingers on Nye's warm shoulder. They'd argued when younger. Clashed in many ways, leaving Curan to separate them.

"Chasing you made me a better assassin."

A niggling, uncomfortable thorn poked at Eroan's mind. "Nye—"

"Everyone else saw it..." Nye's fingers traced lazy circles near Eroan's pectoral muscle. "But you never saw me that way. And then there was always the Order rule... Us? ...It was never going to happen."

Eroan let his gaze crawl over the roof trusses. He'd known Nye had always looked at him with more than respect in his eyes, but they'd been different people then. They were still different people. And something Nye had said in the earlier madness, before they'd washed the blood off, had gotten its claws in Eroan. He hadn't allowed himself to hear it then, but he couldn't forget it now.

I love you, Eroan Ilanea.

"Alumn brought you back..." Nye's stroking fingers wandered lower, over Eroan's abdominal muscles, stirring desires back to life. "I'm grateful, every day I'm grateful. I doubt I would have ever gotten ov—"

"I'm leaving for Ashford today."

Nye's fingers froze.

Eroan closed his eyes and winced as a new stab of guilt hit him. He shouldn't have let this thing with Nye go on this long or go this far. But he'd wanted it, needed it. He couldn't have been alone, he'd have lost his mind to the demons on his back. And Nye, he was good, and... he'd been willing.

Eroan rolled away from Nye's warmth and planted his feet outside the bed, sinking his fingers into his mussed-up hair. The bed rocked and lifted, Nye's weight gone.

"Were you going to tell me if I hadn't come to you last night or were you just going to run out on us like you always do?" Anger clipped each of Nye's words, ending them in a blade's edge.

Eroan rubbed at his face. He was a rotten piece of work. He'd known this wasn't just a distraction for Nye and still he'd let it happen. "I must tell the Higher Order about the weapons and see if there's been any word from France."

Nye snorted. "You *must*? Of course you must. And it has to be you, Eroan Ilanea, the elf who'll single-handedly save the entire known world. It couldn't be a messenger or someone else from the Order? No, it always has to be you."

Eroan's anger bristled. He'd tried to convince Curan. He was trying to do the right thing here. "It's more than that. Akiem knows I'm alive and he'll come looking. I need to move on, to lead a trail away from Cheen." He looked behind him to find Nye hastily snatching some of Eroan's own clothes from a fresh stack—his own were ruined. The too-long trousers bunched around his bare feet. He threw one of Eroan's shirts on, avoiding Eroan's gaze.

Nye was better than this, he knew what had to be done and he knew why the Order insisted on no personal attachments. "We're still Assassins of the Order," Eroan said. "Duty must always come first."

Nye's laugh sounded bitter and broken. "The same excuses, Eroan. Why don't you just admit it? What am I to you, really?" Nye straightened from fastening the shirt and held Eroan's gaze, his jaw twitching. "Were you bored? Was that it?"

"Nye, no."

"And I'm easy?"

Krak, he hadn't wanted this. "Nye..." Eroan grabbed at a pair of discarded trousers and tugged them on, stumbling in his haste as Nye headed for the door. "Wait. It wasn't like that... I... Don't leave things like this between us."

Nye tugged open the door. Sunlight poured in, highlighting his mop of dark hair, ill-fitting clothes, and lack of shoes. He squinted into the light, messing up any chance Eroan had of reading his face. "Leave them how,

Eroan? Me in love with you, and you just passing the time before running out again?”

Eroan stalled, pants half on, hands hitched at the belt. He owed Nye the truth. Stringing him along wasn't going to help either of them. Eroan was leaving and Nye should accept that. It would hurt, but he'd heal. "You and me, we... It needs to end." He sighed. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" Nye's brows tightened, eyes hardening to cover the pain. "Don't be. I'm a fool for giving my heart to someone like you." And then he was gone, the door swinging open so the breeze could filter in, bringing with it the village sounds of laughter and idle conversation.

Eroan stared into the sunlight until his gaze slid to the racks of half-designed weapons and regret solidified into a new resolve. He'd already wasted too many hours with Nye and abandoned his duty for too long. He needed to see Cheen's elders. Now.



"Ah, Eroan, we were just discussing you."

Cheen's elders had the same poise and old-soul look about them as most village elders, at least when compared to the few Eroan had met. He'd been told the group of Cheen's five used to be six, but one of their number had died over a year ago when she'd been hunted by wolves. The sixth seat at the round table was empty and Eroan tried to fight off the unsettling feeling as the remaining elders smiled their polite smiles in his direction.

Still at the door, he bowed his head and caught sight of Curan among the side seats. There were a handful of other important elves here too, figures he barely lingered on. Why did this feel as though he were featuring in his own trial?

Anye, the female who had spoken when he'd arrived, was perhaps the same age as Curan, maybe a little older, if the crinkle lines around her eyes were any indication of her age. She reminded Eroan of Xena, and that too set his nerves on edge. He continued to feel Xena's absence like a hole in his heart.

"Greetings, elders." Eroan approached the long, oval, oak table.

"The impact of your arrival among us has been a profound one," Anye said. "And we are honored to have you in our number." She wore light gray

gowns and bore a small Celtic tattoo on her neck in the same way many of the Cheen villagers liked to ink themselves. Not long after he'd arrived, he'd asked her what it meant, and she'd given him a look telling him never to ask again. Eroan assumed the ink was a reminder of something lost.

Standing before her now, his instincts itched. If they were about to ask him to take a seat at that table, he was afraid he'd say something that would likely get him tossed out of the elder house and possibly out of Cheen altogether. Xena had managed his wild tongue but he was still new to Cheen, his roots still settling in. He knew to keep his words careful, but that wasn't usually his way.

"Ashford should be made aware of the success of our additional weapons," he blurted before any of them could reveal what it was that had them all smiling thin smiles. "I'd like to head out today and take the details to them."

"Yes, Curan made us aware of your insistence on this matter."

Eroan swallowed and kept his eyes on the elders, avoiding Curan's simmering presence. Maybe they were about to tell him he was out of the Order and was to report to the shores tomorrow for his first day on the boats, catching fish. Not that feeding the village wasn't important. He had the utmost respect for any and all of his kin, but he was no fisher. Patience was not his best trait.

"Our messenger has agreed to relay all your findings to Ashford just as soon as you can teach him the necessary—" Anye said.

"Your messenger?"

Chair legs scraped, drawing Eroan's eye to the dark-haired figure he'd skimmed over earlier. The male locked gazes with Eroan and dipped his chin, leading Eroan's gaze to the lines of tribal tattoo near his collar. Recognition briefly tripped Eroan's thoughts. He hadn't seen Trey in... years. But hadn't forgotten him. Trey was the kind of male difficult to forget. He'd cut his hair shorter, so even though it was tied back, most of it fell forward, framing a handsome and distinctive face. He'd also gained a scar and something of a haunted look in his eyes that hadn't been there in his youth. It was a wonder he was still alive. Village messengers died as regularly as assassins.

Eroan's mind turned over. He looked down, trying to reorganize how this should go. He hadn't expected them to say yes and certainly hadn't expected to be sending Trey into danger. But he'd wanted this, hadn't he?

“That’s not necessary,” he heard himself saying, and with it came the strength of knowing he was right. Murmurs tittered around the hall. Eroan raised his voice. “The time it would take me to tell Trey everything I’ve learned is time better spent traveling.”

“It’s my job,” Trey drawled, the elf’s emotive eyes full of confidence.

Eroan ignored him. Another elf wasn’t going to die for his ideas. He’d do this himself. “I’m leaving today with or without your blessing.”

The titters turned to vocal denials. Cheen’s people clearly didn’t like the idea of losing someone they considered an asset. “Since my arrival, I’ve given you much.” He addressed the room, scanning over them all. Nye was here, standing at the back, almost completely hidden in shadow. Janna too, with her partner Ross seated beside her, his hand on her knee. “It’s time I shared the knowledge with others, saving more lives, and spreading the tools we need to win this war, not just survive it.”

“Quiet please...” another of the elders urged the crowd.

When the chattering died down Eroan waited for the verdict. He didn’t need their blessing, but he’d prefer to leave with it. Perhaps Anye knew that, because as she stared back, he saw the moment her mind changed. Her rigid mouth and cool eyes warmed.

“All right,” she said. “Go, but not alone. Another must travel with you.”

“I don’t need—”

Anye’s glare sharpened whip-quick. “As long as you are an Assassin of the Order, you follow their teachings. Assassins must always travel in prides of two or more. Is that not correct, Eroan?”

“Yes,” he replied, feeling like an elfling in Order training all over again.

“I’ll go with him,” Nye’s voice rang out from the back of the hall.

Eroan clenched his teeth.

“Unless Eroan objects?” Nye approached the table, keeping a respectable distance between them. Just two Order assassins doing their duty.

Eroan wanted very much to object but Nye was a capable assassin and the Order rules to run in prides of more than two applied for a reason. His chances of getting the information to Ashford doubled if he wasn’t alone. He could ask for another of the Order, but Curan *would* object when Nye had already volunteered for the dangerous trek.

“No objections,” Eroan said.

“Good, then it’s settled.” Anye beamed. “You leave as soon as you’re ready. May Alumn’s light guide your path, assassins.”

Nye filed out of the hall directly behind Eroan. Eroan made it halfway across the village before turning on his heel. “I don’t need an escort, Nye. Your talents are better spent here, keeping Cheen’s people alive. By Alumn...” Eroan backed away. “You know we’re over, so why drag it out like this?” A few village-folks glanced over, having heard Eroan’s words.

Nye waited. “Are you finished?”

Eroan bit into his cheek. He was far from finished, but nothing he said was going to change anything. Nye was nothing if not stubborn.

“This has nothing to do with *us*.” Nye stepped closer. “And everything to do with getting your information to Ashford. If you trek there alone, you’re at risk of failing and you’re the only one who has the knowledge. If it wasn’t me, you’d ditch anyone else who volunteered or sneak off without them so you can continue your crusade alone.” Nye paused, waiting for Eroan to deny it. “You think you can do it all alone, but you can’t. Stop being so stubborn and see this for what it is. I’m here to help you get the task done. Nothing else. You said it yourself, we’re Assassins of the Order and that must come first. I am capable of doing my job without emotional attachment. I’ve been doing it all my life.”

He was right. Eroan was wrong to doubt his motives and wrong to think he could do this alone. It still felt like a mistake, but Nye had made sure Eroan’s choices were limited. “We leave at dusk.”

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CHAPTER 5



Lysander

LYSANDER CRACKED AN EYE OPEN. He'd chosen to sleep as dragon, mostly because they hadn't given him a bed and the floor was damned hard unless you had scales to bear the weight.

Chloe paced outside the bars, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

He watched her through narrow lids. She chewed on her thumbnail then picked at the wick. He could smell her fear, a zingy scent that quickened his heart, making him want to pounce and chase. It was the first time he'd smelled anything like it on her. She hadn't been afraid on the beach. She hadn't run screaming from the warehouse when he'd shifted the first time. What had her spooked now?

He huffed through his nose, alerting her to how he was awake. She jolted and for a brief second, the fear was all over her, in her face, her eyes, her rod-straight back. Instincts plucked at him to leap and maul. Like this, she exuded *prey*.

Lysander gave his head a shake, clearing the urges, and rumbled low in his throat. Not a growl. This noise was meant for lesser kits, an alert or a small warning to kick them into line, nothing aggressive.

She approached the cage.

If he churned the fire, he could probably stir up enough in a few seconds to blast her before she made it to the door. She'd be dead in seconds. She really was afraid if she wasn't thinking clearly. But not afraid of him. Something else stalked Chloe.

He considered shifting but thought better of it when her wide eyes roamed his face, distracting her thoughts. His own reflection shone green in her eyes. Green scales, green eyes. The fan of his broad, spiked crown.

"You understand me like this, don't you?" she asked.

He huffed again, a gentle puff from the nose that stirred her hair and brought a smile to her hard mouth.

"But you can't talk?"

He rolled his eyes and set her laughing. Of course, he couldn't talk. He had a mouth and tongue designed to break prey and crush bones, not form intricate human words. As she chuckled at her own idiocy, he stretched out a foot, claws gleaming, and planted it close to the bars. His foreclaws, the larger front claws, were half the size of her. One swipe, and he could cut her in half. She carefully eyed the rack of deadly weapons. Few humans had ever gotten so close to a dragon and lived to speak of it.

When she didn't approach, he planted his head next to his foreleg and peered down his snout at the little human woman. Even with his head this low, she was still smaller than his eye level.

"You have beautiful eyes." She folded her arms. "But if you think I'm coming any closer just because you're giving me those sad eyes, you can think again, *mon lézard*."

He couldn't be sure, but he was fairly certain she'd just called him a reptile. He grumbled and grinned, revealing sparkling rows of devastating teeth. It was the wrong thing to do. She swallowed and backed away, the scent of her fear spiking again.

Before he lost her altogether, he summoned the shift, calling his form into itself and crushing the great weight of him into his thumping heart and long-limbed meat-sack, revealing the illusion of a man. She'd looked away, as most human did from visceral magic. He grabbed the bars. "I can help you stop him."

"Who?"

He frowned at her stupid denial. "We both know Dokul is coming. You can't stop a dragon like him. He's an ancient, the first to wake from the ice.

I can barely stop him, but he wants me. So, let me go, I'll draw him away and nobody needs to die."

All her warmth had frozen over again. "If I let you go, you'll kill us all for him, Lysander *Bronze*." She started pacing again.

"I'm not a bronze."

"He says otherwise."

"He's insane."

"And you're not?"

Insane? He almost laughed. He only felt like it some days. "Have I hurt any of you?"

"You've been in there." She flapped her hand at the cage.

This human female was impossible. How could he prove good intentions to her? "I delivered the elf to the beach. I didn't attack any of your people. I could have shifted on that beach and killed the lot of you."

"No you couldn't. You were shot. You didn't want to risk the bolt moving to your heart. I know how it works..."

He tightened his grip on the bars. "Chloe, if I'd wanted to hurt you, I could have. There were what? Six, eight of your men in that tunnel beneath the bronze warren? I could have shifted and slaughtered every single one. The elf too. Your little dragon-teeth knives might have slowed me down, but the outcome would have been the same. I gave you the elf—"

"An unconscious elf. For all I know, you did that to her and you were taking her to the beach to eat. Her leader told us to have you killed so he clearly thought the same."

Lysander rolled his lips together and bought himself a moment to school his emotions, keeping them far from his face. "Eroan is an assassin, he was hardly going to advise you to let me go."

She stopped her pacing and squinted. "How do you know his name?"

"Eroan Ilanea. I know his name because I saved him from the queen. Did you see his swords?" Her eyes narrowed. "Those were mine. He learned about dragon-teeth from *me*." That was a little stretch of the truth, but technically not a lie.

"And yet he gave the order to have you killed? That's hardly the behavior of someone who knew you and believes you to be good. Was that another misunderstanding?"

He bowed his head and bumped it against the bars. "Damn it, human, would you just believe me? Dokul is... He wants me, but not for the

reasons you think. I'm not some important heir. Dokul wants me for some sick fascination he has and because I've slipped through his fingers at his every try to have me. If he finds me, he'll kill me."

She mulled over his words, chewing on her thumb again. "*Il est illusoire de s'imaginer que*. I can't let you out."

"Then you'll die!"

"No, he'll come and we'll kill him."

"Tell me you know that, for certain. That you have some amazing new weapon that goes beyond dragon-teeth, because those teeth won't be enough. He's not just any dragon, he's a force of nature. The earth cradled the first three dragons for thousands of years. A few fancy arrows won't stop him."

She shook her head and headed toward the door. "I can't let you out, Lysander."

"You can," he called. "I'll help you stop him!"

The door slammed behind her. He punched the bars and growled at the resulting pain rippling up his arm. "You're all dead!" His shout echoed.

She was gone, and with her, his last chance and theirs at surviving what was to come.

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CHAPTER 6



Eroan

THE RAIN SET in immediately after leaving Cheen and hadn't let up in the two days Nye and Eroan had been on the move. The trek would take them first down to the coast, where an inlet divided rolling hills, and then upward, into open moorland, until eventually down again into the valley that sheltered Ashford.

Starting a fire had become near impossible, and when the flames did catch, they weren't worth cooking on. Rabbits were plentiful but eating them raw wasn't nearly as appetizing as roasted. That left foraging for winterberries and ripe acorns.

The relentless rain muffled any sound they made, but also hindered listening for dragons and other predators. The temperature dropped two days into the journey, turning the ground to ice and fresh rainfalls to fat, dallying snowflakes. Spring's early shoots soon disappeared beneath the snowfall.

Nye nursed a campfire, trying to coax the flames higher. He blew into his hands. "This is why I'm not a messenger. Can you imagine living like this?"

"I prefer killing dragons." Eroan huddled against a tree, breath misting as he listened outside of Nye's complaints. Naked trees reached skyward into the endless gray. The sky was as gray as the ground, blurring where

one began and the other ended. Easterly snowfall like this wasn't rare, but its timing, at the end of winter, meant wolves would be hungry, bold, and on the lookout for travelers. The fire, should Nye get it built up enough, would keep most predators away.

Nye muttered another complaint, along the lines of having wet feet.

They'd spoken little, and that was fine by Eroan, though he'd caught Nye's long glances and caught himself doing the same often enough. During the long march across the land, Eroan's thoughts had wandered back to Nye, wondering if he'd been too hasty in cutting him out. It wasn't that he didn't care for Nye, he cared for him the same way he cared for all elves in the Order. Nye was honorable, strong, brave. There was no reason not to love him, and yet Eroan couldn't bring himself to commit to more. It wasn't Nye, it was him. Nye had been right. Eroan went looking for battles to fight. He always had, since Curan had found him as a youngling, wet and alone, born of a storm, his only memory that of a dragon's savage attack that took his parents. Maybe after that, he didn't know how to love? He'd ruined what he had with Janna and had now done the same with Nye. Or maybe Alumn believed he didn't deserve to find love?

A twig snapped, pricking Eroan's ear. Eyes narrowed, he straightened away from the tree, waved Nye's concerned glance away, and started maneuvering his way between snow-blanketed trees. Eroan's all-weather coat, a dapple of grays, blended in well with the surroundings, but so did a wolf's. No dragon could tread lightly. The sound had to be that of a larger animal. He ventured through the dense trees to where a stream steamed in the cold air, fogging his line of sight.

A trail of small boot prints led up the stream's bank and then farther down, stopping behind a tree.

"Come out, Seraph." His soft voice traveled until the muted quiet swallowed it up.

"How did you know?" She emerged from behind the tree, wrapped head to toe in a fur-lined hooded coat, sword on her back, as always, nose pink and lips pale.

He smiled. "I didn't, but I had an idea a day back when someone spooked a deer herd."

She plodded over, snow crunching underfoot. "Yeah, well, you forgot to wait for me, so of course I was going to follow you."

“Forgot to wait for you?” He arched an eyebrow. He’d had no intention of waiting for her, or even telling her he was leaving, knowing this exact situation would have happened. And here she was anyway.

She thumped him playfully on the arm. “Where you go, I go. We’re a pride now.”

“Is that so?”

She shrugged and stomped back through Eroan’s tracks toward the slither of smoke rising from Nye’s small fire. “No way am I staying in Cheen without you.” She turned and linked the little finger on each hand together. “We’re like this, right? We bonded at the bronze wall. Don’t tell me we didn’t or feed me some nonsense about going back to Cheen for my *own safety*.” She mocked his voice, the one he’d used to scold young and foolish trainee assassins.

“Right.” He patted her on the head and jogged ahead. “Come on then, if you can keep up.”

“Ha, keep up? I’d have been there by now if you two hadn’t slowed me down.”

Nye looked up from the fire, flashing a broad grin. “It’s about time you stopped messing around in the woods, Seraph.”

She frowned at him, then at Eroan. “I wasn’t messing around.”

“You need to work on softening your footing,” he added. “For someone so small, you make a lot of noise.”

Her scowl hardened. She threw her hands down, gesturing at the snow melting on her boots. “Snow crunches. I don’t have wings—”

“No,” a new male voice said, “but I do.” A tall figure emerged among the trees, his armor so black it looked like a hole in the snow. Ruffles of black wolf-fur lined his collar and wrists. Long, unbraided black hair fanned about his shoulders, reaching halfway down his arms.

Akiem.

Eroan’s instincts roared to the surface. He freed his sword, surging forward, making a barrier between Akiem and Seraph. The last time Eroan had seen Akiem, he’d ordered Eroan’s torture. Seeing him here, now, hands raised and walking into their camp like it was perfectly acceptable, summoned a terrible, wild recklessness: To kill, to protect. He bared his teeth. “Take a step closer and I’ll gut you where you stand.”

Akiem’s left eyebrow twitched. “Please, your threats are worthless. Even with my brother’s sword you couldn’t overpower me, *elf*.” He had

snarled *elf* as an insult. Dark eyes skipped to the sight behind Eroan, taking in Nye and Seraph.

He couldn't be alone. Akiem was no fool. There would be others nearby. But where? Which direction?

Eroan scanned the sky. The low, gray clouds could easily hide a flight of dragons.

His heart thumped. Memories crowded close: Akiem ordering Red-Eye to start cutting and the sizzling agony that followed. Akiem's words had left their scars.

He moved in.

"Not another step, dragon," Eroan warned.

Akiem lowered his hands and stopped his approach. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"No?" Seraph snarled, voice quaking. "You destroyed my home! You took me to the bronze! I remember you!" She bolted around Eroan and unleashed a roar, all fire and fury.

Eroan hooked an arm around her waist, pulling her back, into his arms, trapping her flailing sword-arm at her side. She bucked and kicked. "Stop..." he growled out. "Stop, Seraph."

"Let me go!"

"You can't fight him now... Not here." He wanted to. The fire in his blood demanded vengeance. He could taste it, like acid on his tongue. But the risk was too great and his mission too important. The dragon could have killed them all by now, so clearly he didn't want them dead. They could still survive this.

Her struggles subsided. He kept her trapped, knowing her too well to fall for her submissive act. The second he let her go, she'd lunge at Akiem.

"And I remember you," Akiem said. "The fiery little elfling the bronze chief took a liking to. You escaped him, I see. I'm intrigued as to how you managed that."

"I'm not telling you a damned thing, monster!"

"You both have my brother's swords." Akiem mused, his smile razor thin. "Where you are, elf," his gaze flicked to Eroan, "Lysander follows. So tell me, where is he?"

Eroan swallowed. Could it be Akiem didn't know Lysander was dead? "Why should we tell you anything?"

He breathed in, nostrils widening. "If you don't, it would be nothing for me to crush all three of you. There are no dragon carcasses nearby for you to hide in."

He'd known. And he'd let them go. He hadn't wanted to kill them outside Cheen, he'd wanted answers. But being dragon hadn't worked. And now he was here, looking a human, though he could never fully imitate them. He stood too still, his gaze unblinking.

"We can soon make one." Nye moved up to stand close behind Eroan.

Akiem chuckled, "You elves really are very entertaining." He examined a piece of grit under his nails, then stretched his fingers, rippling them, like Eroan had seen dragons do with their claws. "I can see why Lysander would keep Eroan as a pet." His gaze lingered now on Eroan. "You're easy on the eye, at least. My mother recognized that in you."

Old memories swirled, old wounds reopening. A cool sweat dampened Eroan's skin. A leather collar clamped around his neck. A knife carving through his chest. "Lysander is dead."

Akiem's smile vanished. "How do you know this?"

"I killed him myself."

Purple fire flashed in his eyes. "When?"

"When the bronze line fell. On the beach..."

Seraph tensed in Eroan's arms. He should have told her before now, but some part of him had hoped he'd never have to.

Akiem tilted his head, studying Eroan. "That was months ago. Lysander is not dead. He was captured on that beach. You were there, elf. You will tell me where he is. *No more lies.*" A rumbling growl bubbled from the dragon, a sound no man could make.

"He's dead. I..." Eroan hated the break in his voice, the stammer in his words. Seraph bucked again, and this time he let her go. She stumbled back, away from him and Akiem, toward Nye. Eroan couldn't look at her, knowing the horror he'd see on her face. "I had him killed," he admitted. Confusion muddled Akiem's expression. "I thought he was just another dragon. He's dead."

Akiem sighed hard. "You believe it, but you're wrong. Dokul would not be tearing great swathes in the land to find Lysander if his body had been discarded on that beach. He's alive, elf. But clearly, you're of no use to me." Akiem turned away, black cloak whipping around him. "Be gone from these hills by morning when I will be hungry for elf."

Seraph pushed forward and opened her mouth to fling what would probably be an insult at him. Eroan shook his head. “Don’t.” He had more reason than any of them to want Akiem dead, and one day he’d see it happen, but not here. They were not prepared and igniting Akiem’s ire while he was leaving would only see them all killed. “Let him go. Our mission comes first.”

“Let him go!? Who even are you because there’s no way Eroan Ilanea would have let that beast just walk away!”

Eroan kicked at the fire, instantly dousing it under snow. “We move now, and we keep moving.”

“He’s the reason Xena was killed!”

“I know!” Eroan snapped back, jolting Seraph in surprise. Fear fluttered her lashes. Fear of him, he realized. Replacing the sword on his back he set off on the track away from the camp. “Nobody wants Akiem dead more than me.”

“You killed Lysander?” Her words echoed through the silence, chasing him down. He pulled his coat tighter and trudged on.

“Hush,” Nye said. “Let’s not draw more beasts to us.”

Seraph barged by Eroan and stomped into his path. “Tell me. I deserve to know. He saved me, Eroan. And he kept on saving me and you... he saved you, and you killed him?” Her big eyes glistened.

“Yes. And I’ve thought of little else. Now get. I’m done talking about it. We keep moving—”

“Did *you* do it?” She squared up to him. “Did you?” She shoved at his chest, rocking him on his feet. “Well, did you kill the one dragon who’s only ever helped us?”

A shuddering sigh melted the rage away, leaving him cold and wretched. “You were unconscious and they brought a dragon out. He had a bag over his head.” Alumn, he remembered what that felt like. The suffocating lack of air, the disorientation. “I didn’t know who he was... until you said he’d saved you.” That same heartfelt pain tried to crush him now. “I told them to have him killed. It’s done.” *Kill him. Make him suffer.*

“Then what that dragon said could be true?” she asked. “He could be alive, right? The humans might have him.”

Eroan shoved her out the way and marched onward, boots crunching through the snow. “None of that matters... Our duty is here.”

But it did matter. He could feel the little flicker of hope brightening the darkness inside. The terrible weight of guilt lessened, just enough to allow him to breathe easier. Lysander could be alive? And if it were true, and Akiem had been right that Lysander had been captured, Eroan knew exactly where to find him. He'd seen the cage, the only one like it. Dragon-sized and almost ready. But France was a long journey south, the opposite direction to Ashford.

He heard Nye behind him tell Seraph to let it go, but she wouldn't.

"If Dokul finds him," Seraph muttered, "he'll kill him, and he'll make it terrible... They do things, Eroan... bad things."

"*I know very well what they do,*" he growled back, reliving the attempted rape that at times felt so long ago or only yesterday. The unyielding strength of the bronze, the brutality of their desires, the stench of them, their rough hands taking. Lysander had saved him from that fate too.

"What the dragons do to each other is none of our concern," Nye said. "Better they kill each other than us."

"But you don't know him—"

"He's dragon. He put a collar on Eroan. That's all I need to know."

Eroan trekked on and pulled his coat tighter around himself, blocking out the cold. The shivers still traveled deep and the sword on his back grew heavier with every step. It hadn't been Lysander who put the collar on him, that had been the queen—the dragon Lysander had killed. At every turn in the tower, Lysander had prevented the worst from happening. Why, he wasn't sure, but he owed him much. Elvenkind owed him much too.

Eroan owed him everything.

Protect him, an old dragon had once told him. *He won't ask for it and will fight you at every step, but you must protect him.*

He is the future.

Eroan knew his future, getting to Ashford, rallying more elves, putting the right weapons in their hands. His future was ahead of him, not in his past.



THE TREK to Ashford passed uneventfully after Akiem's appearance. Eroan doubled back a few times, making sure they weren't being tracked. It would

have made perfect sense for Akiem to let them go only to track them straight to Ashford, but the dragon wasn't following. Akiem's lack of interest in finishing them off likely meant he had bigger problems keeping him occupied.

Eventually, the weather brightened and the snow thawed, leaving them soaked to the bone, chilled and sore. Nye was again muttering about how it took a special breed of elf to be a messenger when a high-pitched whistle brought Eroan to a halt.

A pride of Ashford elves broke from the banks of prickly gorse either side of the path, their clothes perfectly camouflaged to keep them hidden. Eroan might have walked right by them had they not revealed themselves.

"Your business?" the leading elf asked. He had the hard face of someone who had seen too much trouble in his lifetime. His rippling red hair, streaked with gray, reminded Eroan of the autumn forests.

"We're here to see the Ashford Higher Order. My name is Eroan Ilanea. My companions are Nye Cadogan and Seraph Brennan."

The male's green eyes flicked to the dragonblade at his back. Eroan freed one of the daggers of his own design from the sheath at his hip and held it out, handle first. The guard's scrutinizing gaze took the blade's curve and serrated edge in, then equally critically roamed over Nye and Seraph.

"I'm Sentinel Venali. We have heard of your accomplishments, Eroan. You and your companions are welcome at Ashford. Follow us." The guard whistled and his pride of elves wordlessly closed ranks behind them, escorting them down a hillside toward what appeared to be a mound of grass-covered earth. Eroan had been here before, long ago, when Xena decided to have him see the rest of elven society—likely grooming him for a seat on the elder council. The mound sheltered a covered door, one of several well-guarded entrances to Ashford's underground center. From the outside, Ashford was no more than a rolling landscape of grass and gorse with the occasional odd bump in the earth, but below the surface beat the cavernous heart of elven society.

"What is this place?" Seraph asked as they trekked down what appeared to be a metal staircase burrowed through the earth. Where the metal had rusted away, industrious elves had patched the holes with timber. Strange metallic ribs poked through the dirt walls. Parts of the old, human-made walls, Eroan assumed.

“It used to be a human meeting place.” Eroan recalled Xena’s teachings. “A temple or some kind of communal gathering area where they traded goods. Hundreds of years ago, it was above ground, like all their huge settlements were.”

The tunnel opened into a vast open space made up of several galleried floors. In the center of the atrium, an enormous tree reached through the floors and up to where light poured from a domed glass ceiling. Dust motes dallied in the air like snowflakes might and a few wintering butterflies twitched and skittered between the tree’s budding branches. Little had changed, Eroan noticed, as Nye and Seraph approached the safety rail. Vines and flora still dangled from the higher levels. Moss coated much of the surfaces, hiding whatever the structure behind. Once, he’d been told, the levels flowed with hundreds of people, each visiting the internal rooms to buy goods. There were hundreds of rooms here, some large, some tiny. So many that most were closed off, the elves only used a third of the space excavated over the years.

“Please, follow us.” Venali urged them on toward an official entrance where they were asked their names and village and waved on through the heavy iron doors. Venali’s pride dissipated.

“Have you been to Ashford before?” Venali asked.

“I have,” Eroan replied, “many seasons ago.”

“You’ll find the residential wing in the same place. Head straight there and you’ll be assigned temporary quarters for your stay. I’ll inform the Order of your arrival. You’ll be summoned to an audience with them shortly.”

Eroan nodded and led Nye and Seraph down the staircase from one floor to another, passing many elves. Some were marked like Cheen’s villagers, others had paler skin, some with darker skin and narrow eyes. But all wore layered clothing that seemed to indicate importance, like villager elders. Eroan wished he’d paid more attention to Xena all those years ago.

“I’ve never seen anything like this ...” Seraph muttered, wide-eyed. She caught the rail of the first floor and peered up through the central atrium and reaching branches to where they’d originally entered on the levels above. “It’s huge.” Columns of light plunged straight through the center, making the tree appear to glow. Murmurs from the residents going about their business kept the quiet at bay, peppered by the occasional laugh. Elves

strode from place to place or loitered in the light at the atrium's center. "It's... *magical*."

Eroan leaned against the rail and took a few moments to admire what the Ashford elves had built here. There were more of them than he remembered. He counted thirty at a glance, with many coming and going. Hunters, elders, guards, but few children. This was no place for elflings.

"That tree must be hundreds of years old. How have the dragons not discovered this place?" Nye whispered.

"Only esteemed elders and messengers are permitted inside," Eroan said. "Ashford's exact location is kept hidden from anyone who doesn't need to know."

"Elders, messengers and *you*." Nye's mouth quirked around a smile.

"Xena brought me here," he said, trying to imply their entry had nothing to do with his reputation when they all knew no elf would have turned Eroan away.

Their quarters were ample-sized windowless rooms fitted with simple cot beds and plumbed water systems, very different to their village huts. Seraph squealed with delight and plunged her hands into a basin of warm water, then sat on her bed and bounced a few times before flinging herself backward onto the clean, puffy sheets with a sigh. "I've died and found Alumn's garden."

Eroan smiled at her glee. He wouldn't have traded an Ashford room for his own hut. He needed the light, the breeze, the earth beneath his feet. Most elves didn't stay in Ashford for long, the center was a place of business, of rule-making and council meetings. Elves were not designed to be hidden below ground, which was likely why no dragon had thought to look for them here.

After having his wet coat collected for cleaning and drying, and fresh clothes left for him to change into, he was collected and taken to the Higher Order's council chambers. Tapestries hung on the walls, making the Order chamber feel small despite being four times the size of Cheen's Order house.

The Order assassins greeted him as Cheen's had, with relief and respect. He let them tell of how his own myth had grown, smiling at their polite greetings and delight in his arrival.

Once they'd settled, he told the dais of elders the knowledge he'd gained from the humans, their ingenious weapons, and the designs of

dragon-teeth weapons. Question after question came next. They wanted details of his stay with the humans in the land called France, the layout of the amethyst tower, the number of dragons he'd seen, and the names of those he'd met. The meeting went on for hours, until the light had faded and the torches and candles were lit to chase away the night. He should have expected it but dredging up his time in the tower left him drained, and the memories fresh in his mind. Finally, the Order dismissed him until the morning, and he left them deliberating everything among themselves.

"I wondered if they were keeping you forever." Nye stood propped against the bannister outside Eroan's room, uncaring about the drop through the atrium to the ground floor behind him.

"Felt like it." He entered his quarters, leaving the door open behind him. Perhaps he should have let it click closed, but exhaustion clouded his thoughts. Being alone with the memories so close felt like a death sentence. He filled the room's small basin with cool water and plunged his hands in, then splashed the water over his face. They'd wanted to know it all. So many questions... so much he'd tried to forget.

Would the horror of the tower ever leave him?

A hand settled on his back, between his shoulders and although Nye couldn't have known how his touch brushed the whip scars beneath, Eroan had to fight the urge to brush the touch away—to push Nye away. The memories were close, crowding in. The whip cracks, sounds he'd thought he'd forgotten sounded again, making muscles jolt.

"They wanted to know it all?" Nye softly asked.

He removed his hand, allowing Eroan to finally breathe and settle his nerves. Before the dragon queen, he'd been stronger than this, better than this. Nothing had rattled him. But now... He ran a wet hand around the back of his neck, cooling flushed skin. "All of it."

He hadn't told Nye half of what had been done to him, but much of it had been obvious in the scars he now carried, outside and in.

"Did you tell them?"

"Some." Some things were too painful to tell but he was sure they read between his words.

"It will get easier." Nye leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Give it time."

Eroan felt his mouth curl into a wry smile. Xena had said the same. Now she was dead. "With the knowledge I've just given them, they can

make a real difference.” He straightened and ran a wet hand through his hair, pulling it back from his face. “They’ll send messengers to other villages. The Order will have a purpose again, but this time it will be to end the dragons, for good. Elves have weapons now... just not the numbers, but it can be done... if we partner with humans.” He hadn’t broached that with the elders yet, and they’d likely be reluctant, but it was the only way. He had to make them see the potential in working with the humans again—like elves had once before.

“Xena would be proud, you know?” Nye said. “She always was, but to see all you’ve accomplished... She is with Alumn, and she sees you.”

So why did he still feel like a failure? “It’s not enough.”

“Only to you.” Nye reached out and lay a gentle hand on Eroan’s shoulder. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Nye’s gaze was full of too much understanding. Eroan had seen the same look on Xena’s face, like everything would be all right if he just gave it time, but time wasn’t going to change his past, time wasn’t going to fix the future. Time did nothing without action. Eroan needed to act.

Nye turned his face away, toward the door, contemplating leaving. Not so long ago, Eroan would have pulled Nye close and kissed him on the neck, right where Nye couldn’t help but give in. They’d have fallen into one another, into the place Eroan could go to forget.

He took Nye’s hand from his shoulder and lowered it between them, but held on, not wanting to let go. Nye looked down at their joined hands. His dark hair fell forward, hiding his expression, then his fingers slipped from Eroan’s and with a regrettable smile, Nye left. The door closed behind him with a definitive click.

It was for the best, but that didn’t make it easier. And now Eroan was alone with the memories.

He threw on his coat, headed out of his room and knocked on Seraph’s door. She answered moments later, bleary-eyed and yawning. “Did you just get back?”

“Walk with me?” He forced a smile and hoped if he wore it long enough, it would stick. “I’ll show you Ashford. At night, the moonlight filters into the atrium. It’s beautiful.”

Her mouth stretched into a grin. “Yes!” She bounded back inside and reemerged moments later, her hair dampened down and her eyes a little

brighter. With her alongside him, her chattering full of wonder, the bad memories finally fell away.



TALKS PERSISTED FOR DAYS. Eroan sketched out the plans for the ballista weapons and others he'd learned from the humans. Messengers were dispatched. A war council was to be summoned to Ashford, and Eroan would be on that council as a ruling member. Progress. It felt good, better than good, it felt right. And yet he still couldn't shake the feeling it wasn't enough.

Sunlight poured in through the atrium and Eroan took a few moments between meetings to sit and soak up the light among a few other elves doing the same. Lying back among the roots, hands laced behind his head, he watched the dust motes drift on the breeze. He should have been at peace, but something had his body and blood restless.

Seraph dropped into a cross-legged position beside him. "How's it all going?"

"Good." With the sun behind Seraph, he squinted at her, catching part of her smile in front of the glare. Whatever she'd gotten up to over the past few days, it agreed with her. She glowed in the warm light. "You?"

"Awesome." She flicked her scarred ear. "They all want to know how I got this, so naturally I told them how I killed the dragon who did it. Then I told them how I was at the bronze wall when it fell and now, I'm like... some kind of hero or something. *Seraph Brennan*," she gushed, "*partner to Eroan Ilanea, Slayers of Dragons*."

He smiled and closed his eyes, basking in the warmth. The council would be calling him back soon. He just needed a moment in the light to feed his bones and shake off the growing sense of unease. Tiredness, that was all. It would pass.

"You know..." Seraph began, in a way that told him she was about to ask for something. "I heard they've had a new message from France."

Eroan kept his eyes closed. His smile faltered.

"The bronze chief is closing in on Lysander's location. The humans have some plan to kill the chief. The guard I spoke to wouldn't tell me any more. I er... I might have listened in anyway. The elders think the plan will

fail. They've tried to advise against it. Like always, the stupid humans aren't listening." She let that sink in and said, "He'll get Lysander."

Eroan's breathing stuttered, despite his best efforts to calm it, along with his treacherous heart trying to race ahead of his thoughts. "There's nothing I can do."

"You know where he is, don't you?"

How had she figured that out? He cracked an eye open to find her peering down at him. "I have a good idea, yes. The humans I stayed with, they built a substantial cage to keep a dragon."

"And those are the same humans who took the bronze wall with you?"

He nodded. "If he's alive, he's there."

"And you're just going to let that beast find him?"

He wet his lips and closed his eyes again to keep her from seeing him falter. "He'll be where he belongs, with his own kind." They were his words, and they sounded like something he should say, but they tasted bitter and wrong, like something poisonous.

She made a disgruntled huffing noise. "His own kind? It seems to me, from everything I've heard about your time with him, and from what I saw myself, Lysander is *nothing* like his own kind."

"He's a dragon prince, Seraph. For all we know, what we saw was an act." Still his words. Still lies.

"To what end?"

It wasn't an act. He wasn't even sure why he was saying these things. He clearly remembered the prince who had tried to get him to eat, telling him he'd need his strength. The same prince who appeared drunk when Eroan was trussed up against the queen's wall, his eyes full of sorrow and want. The prince who was to be sold to the bronze in some strange dragon ritual. One he had clearly not wanted. The prince so hollow, he'd so desperately wanted not to be alone anymore. Eroan knew exactly what that felt like. You could be surrounded by people and still be alone.

"He vowed to keep me safe, and he did, and you don't know how he did it, because I've not told you, but you should know—"

"Seraph—"

"He sold himself to the horrible dragon for me. The things Dokul will do to him... He wants Lysander, like it's some kind of madness. I can't sleep, Eroan. I can't stop thinking about what's going to happen to him. I have to do something. You know that feeling, you follow it all the time.

That inside part of you that tells you it's right. That part is telling me I owe him to at least try to help him."

Eroan sat up, pulling a leg to his chest. "You can't go."

"The bronze wall has fallen. How hard can it be? I know the way back. I'll find a boat or something..."

"Seraph, it's too dangerous."

"You did it."

He winced. "That was different."

"Why?"

Because he hadn't cared if he'd lived or died, but he cared for Seraph. "What are you going to do if you get there? Just let him out of that cage? The humans won't allow it."

Her brows pinched. "They'll listen to you."

"My place is here. We're making progress. Soon we'll be able to assault the dragon tower—"

"Come with me."

"I can't, and you can't go either. What you're suggesting is madness." He couldn't listen to this nonsense any longer and climbed to his feet. She blinked up at him. "You musn't go, Seraph. Give me your word you won't."

"He'll die," she said. "I know you wanted him dead on that beach, but I saw the look on your face after Akiem said he was alive. He's good. Can you live with yourself knowing you could have done something to save him and didn't?"

He is the future. Alumn, why couldn't he forget that old dragon's words?

"I never wanted him dead," Eroan admitted quietly. "All this time I thought I'd killed him... and when Akiem said he was alive ... I was *relieved*, yes. But that's all." It wasn't all. Akiem's words had left him with more than relief, they'd left him with feelings he didn't dare examine, the same feeling of restlessness that itched even now. He closed his hands into fists. "You can't save him. I can't save him. We are Assassins of the Order. No elf shall aid a dragon." He gritted his teeth, hearing the words and somehow hating them.

"You have to do something. He has no one else." She got to her feet too and stared up at him, her mouth set in a firm, determined line. "You're Eroan Ilanea. You're the only one who can save him."

“I do not save dragons. I kill them. And so do you.” His voice shattered the quiet, silencing the chatter among the others seated around them and drawing their curious glances. “Forget this nonsense or I’ll inform Curan of your indiscretion and you’ll be struck from the Order.”

Unshed tears gleamed in her fierce eyes.

Regret was a stone on his gut. He steeled himself against that wretched, empty feeling. Her foolish ideas would get them both reprimanded or worse.

“You know I’m right!” she snapped. “You’re afraid!”

He turned away from her and the truth in her words.

“You feel it, just like I do! You’ll never forgive yourself, Eroan!”

Her words rang in his ears and deeper, into the raw wounds he’d carried with him since leaving the queen’s tower and Lysander to die.

He was Eroan Ilanea, Assassin of the Order. He saved elves, not dragons.

Lysander, wherever he might be, was on his own.

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CHAPTER 7



Lysander

SCREAMS and the oily smell of smoke roused Lysander from a deep, dreamless sleep. He blinked his dragon-eyes open and squinted into a bank of fog rolling into the warehouse. Not fog, he realized, heart sinking. Smoke. The dragonkin were here.

As dragon, he threw himself at the bars, rattling the cage structure, but it held. Again and again, he struck until his ribs ached from the impact and the smoke was almost too thick to see through. Then a dragon's roar shattered the night, calling to the depths of his soul. A roar of victory, so thunderous it shook the warehouse floor and walls.

Dokul.

Gods no...

Lysander shifted to human, hoping that form might be more useful if any human arrived first. Chloe. He needed Chloe to come. She'd come with the keys and let him out. She was smart. Stupid too, but also smart. She knew he was her only hope at surviving this.

"Hey!" He gripped the bars. "Hey!"

Nobody came. The screams faded until all he could hear was fire burning and devouring.

Chloe stumbled in, rifle in her grip.

"Let me out now, Chloe!" He thrust an arm through the bars. "Quickly."

She staggered, spluttering breaths, and was halfway to the cage when a huge figure emerged from the rolling clouds of smoke.

Dokul seemed larger backlit by roiling flames. Broad shoulders carried his muscular bulk. His face sneered his victory. Like every time Lysander had seen him, the male wore one bronze pauldron, the rest of his upper body and head were bare, hairless, and gleaming in the firelight. A pale scar smiled across his neck where Seraph had cut him.

“Stay back or I’ll kill Lysander,” Chloe stammered, making it another few steps. She aimed the rifle at Lysander.

Lysander gripped the bars. “Let me out.” Calm and steady, if he pushed too much, she’d run.

She glanced his way, eyes wide with panic. *Let me out*, he tried to convey with his eyes alone. *You can still live but you have to let me out now.*

Dokul’s liquid laugh filled the warehouse. He strode closer, boots clunking. The metal adornments clipped to his belt rattled and chimed. “That little weapon of yours will not kill Lysander the same as it couldn’t stop me.”

Dokul’s gaze fell to Lysander. The male’s eyes darkened. His pink tongue wet his lips. The weight of his desire was a reeking, visceral thing, clearly visible in the outline of the huge erection pushing at his trousers.

Lysander ground his teeth. Disgust inched its way up his throat. “Chloe, unlock this door. You can still live.”

She swung the rifle toward Dokul and fired. The bullet punched him low in the chest and out his back. Dokul barely missed a step. Blood dribbled from the bullet hole and the big male just grinned it off. He beckoned with his fingers. “Try again.”

“Chloe, damn it!” Lysander slammed his hands against the bars. “Let me out!”

She dropped the gun and fumbled in her pocket, coming for the cage door. The keys shone on her fingers. So close. Seconds. Just seconds. She rummaged through the keys, searching for the right one.

They fell from her fingers, clattering to the floor.

Dokul’s grin grew.

Chloe muttered in her own language, words he didn’t understand. A prayer perhaps, to whatever god she worshipped. It had better answer.

Dokul sauntered closer.

He'd kill her. And then Lysander.

"Hurry," Lysander hissed.

She picked up the bundle of keys and searched for the right one, hands shaking. Her fingers clamped around a key he recognized. She pulled it free. Her eyes met Lysander's.

Dokul slammed into her from behind, crushing her against the bars. She screamed, eyes wild and searching. Lysander could do nothing but watch. Dokul grabbed her by the back of the neck and pinned her still beneath him. He yanked her head to the side and bit down, his teeth tearing into her neck, choking off her screaming.

Lysander backed up until he hit the rear of the cage. In moments, she was dead. If she was lucky, Dokul would make it quick.

Blood flowed freely from between Dokul's teeth and down, over Chloe's shoulder, soaking into her shirt. Dokul lifted his eyes and pinned Lysander under his gaze as Chloe's thrashing faded. The son of a breeding-bitch ground himself against her, his eyes burning into Lysander's. Only when she stopped fighting did he free his teeth from her neck and fling her aside.

The bite had been deliberate, one dragons performed as a proclamation of sexual dominance. It was meant for Lysander. He hadn't fucked her. He was saving that for Lysander too.

Chloe gasped where she'd fallen against the floor, her panting breaths came fast, but strong. That was good. If she stayed quiet she might survive.

"I tore the world apart looking for you." Dokul plunged the key into the cage lock. "And here you are." The mechanisms clunked and the door swung inward.

Lysander eyed the tiny gap to freedom, but it lasted only moments before Dokul's bulk filled it. The male took the door and slammed it shut behind him, locking himself inside. He lifted the keys, knowing Lysander's only chance was to retrieve them, and tucked them into his trouser pocket beside his obviously engorged cock.

It had been too much to ask for it to be Mirann who found him first.

"And here I was the whole time..." Lysander circled left and Dokul followed, chest heaving. Rivulets of perspiration ran down the male's chest. Lysander couldn't get away from the pungent smell of him, sweat and metal and now sex.

Lysander could have faked attraction before, could have managed his way through some rough sex, but not now, not like this. The raw, terrible need in his eyes? It was dragon. Dokul was barely thinking at all.

Lysander curled his fingers into fists. If only Chloe had believed him... And now there was no escaping what was coming next.

Dokul lowered his hand and stroked his cock, his golden pupils widening as he pleased himself through the fabric. "You going to be easy, prince, or hard?"

In the corner of his eye, Lysander spotted Chloe slowly dragging herself away, leaving a trail of smeared blood behind her. *Yes, go, run, fucking survive.* Someone had to.

Dokul's hand worked. Maybe the male would overexcite himself and get it done without Lysander having to get involved.

They'd circled back around to the cage door. Lysander gave it a tug. It didn't budge. Not surprising, considering how his luck was going. "So, you came all this way to make me watch you jerk off?"

"I've waited a long time for this." Dokul stepped right, ending the circling, trapping Lysander in the corner. "Nowhere to go. You're all mine." The wall of muscle surged forward.

Lysander ducked and pushed off the bars, easily avoiding Dokul's lumbering attack. The male growled and rebounded, starting after him again. "The more you try to escape, the more I want you, *Lysander Bronze.*"

"About that name—"

Dokul darted right. Lysander feigned left, then bounced back, leaving Dokul off-balance and open for the fist Lysander planted across his jaw. It was well-aimed and hit hard, if the retort of pain blasting up Lysander's arm was anything to go by. The problem was, hitting Dokul was like trying to knock out a mountain, and the male swung back, slamming a fist into Lysander's middle, instantly blasting all the air out of his lungs.

Black spots swam in Lysander's vision. Dokul's steely fingers clamped around his neck and the male's free hand was at Lysander's waist, desperately pulling on his belt. Lysander's head spun, lungs burning for air. This was happening. Fuck, this was happening... after everything, after years of fighting him off.

Dokul pushed Lysander face-first into the bars and growled into Lysander's ear. The rod-hard press of Dokul's cock shoved against his ass. With too many clothes between them, Lysander had time to stop this if he

could just breathe again. He focused on that, breathing in, breathing out, as Dokul's rough hands fought with his belt and trousers. Passing out wouldn't save him from Dokul's fit of lust, he'd wake again with Dokul on him, *in* him.

Blurred spots began to clear, his lungs inflating again, his body coming back to him. There was still time.

Dokul's blunt teeth sank into his neck.

He let out an involuntary cry and clutched at the bars. The teeth sank deeper. Lysander pushed back, but Dokul was too big, too heavy, and with his teeth in his neck, the rough movement forced Dokul's teeth deeper still. Blood flowed and a sick, twisting sense that he'd already lost slithered around him. Dokul's growls grew heavier and suddenly his efforts spent on Lysander's clothing paid off. Lysander's belt and trousers skimmed down, over his hips. Cold air hit the back of his thighs and with it came the shock of reality. The male's hand was gone, his body easing off. Lysander bucked, cracked his head back, striking something. Pain flashed. Dokul shoved against his shoulder. The hard thrust of the male's cock dove between Lysander's ass and thighs, the male's haste the only thing saving him from penetration.

Lysander growled through his teeth. Thoughts pulling together, he summoned the magic that would free his true form, and yanked all the power into him, releasing the shift in a sudden, furious blast that tore him open and at the same time remade him into dragon.

Dokul must have recognized the signs the second Lysander called to the magic, and the bronze chief responded in-kind. Mid-shift, Lysander registered the taste of metal and old magics. A smothering weight pushed in from behind and another crushed his chest until Lysander thought his bones might all shatter at once. Then the cage bars exploded outward, spilling him into the warehouse with Dokul—all wings and claws—behind him.

Lysander whirled, tucked his good wing in, and charged at the enormous bronze's middle, slamming into the beast's chest and driving on, through a wall, out into a world of smoke and fire and burning bodies. Bricks and dust bounced off his scales. He couldn't let up, not for a second.

Dokul's enormous dragon form scrabbled in the dirt for purchase, his claws digging up great furrows of earth. He dug in and twisted, tail lashing like a whip.

Lysander struck at his neck, teeth snapping together too late with a resounding crack. He'd missed.

Dokul's mountainous weight slammed into Lysander's broken wing. White agony snapped up Lysander's side, momentarily burying him in nowhere and nothing, wrenching a roar up his throat and out. He needed to turn this around, to fight back, to focus, but Dokul's clawed foot came down, clamping on Lysander's neck, pinning him to the ground. Air lodged in Lysander's throat. Fire churned, trapped behind Dokul's weight. He snapped and snarled, trying to bite and tear at the heavier dragon's grip.

Dokul spread his vast wings, flung his head skyward, and bellowed toward the skies.

Pain fizzled and snapped down Lysander's spine. He writhed and bucked, tried to claw at the dirt, to dig in and buck Dokul off, but the bronze was a crushing weight on his neck, choking off his consciousness.

Dokul's smothering weight shifted, settling between Lysander's wings, and the foot on his neck was replaced by rows of piercing teeth. Each of those teeth sank through scale, plunging into Lysander's flesh. An ill-timed twitch from Lysander and Dokul's bite would tear out his throat. Pinned, beaten, Lysander's panicked thoughts tumbled over, searching for a way out, for escape. This couldn't happen. He hadn't spent a lifetime fighting for Dokul to win now.

Pain and pressure pushed at Lysander's rear, beneath his tail—a hard, barbed rod spread him open, forcing inside. Lysander locked his jaw and gritted his teeth together so hard the ache in his head almost overcame the ache *below*. Unbidden growls burbled through his chest, but with his throat clamped, he couldn't roar out the hurt. His foreclaws sank into the dirt, digging deep as Dokul fell into a sickening, pounding rhythm. The beast's rapid grunting filled Lysander's head, forcing its way inside, just like the rest of him. Splintering pain broke him open until his whole world became Dokul's weight, his grunting, and the agony he dealt with every thrust.

But inside it all, a new fire made of hate burned, a fire so furious it could burn the world.



THE ENORMOUS BRONZE brood had abandoned their warren across the ocean channel for the fields of Northern France. They'd excavated a huge crater, forming a nest, and although exposed to the winter elements, it didn't seem to bother them. Bronze were nothing if not resilient. They huddled together, fucked and snapped at one another in close quarters, like the animals they were.

And now Lysander was among them, his scales green against their golden hues. He hated that too, that he was jeweled and they were metal. Carline had once told him his green scales were rare, a freak of dragon genetics. He'd laughed at her words, so fitting were they. Trapped in the nest, he wondered about her sometimes, the old wise one who had always been there for him. He wondered about Amalia too, the sister he'd loved. Her death had been inevitable. Like his was. He wondered about Mirann, and why she was not here. Perhaps she had stayed behind, or perhaps Dokul had killed her. He wondered about Akiem, alone on their mother's throne. Akiem wanted him dead, but he could not find it in himself to hate his brother for that—for surviving in a world where enemies were killed or fucked into submission.

Dokul padded back into the nest and all around his dragon brood rolled over, exposing their bellies, nipping and snapping, teeth exposed in strange, nervous grins. Lysander lay still and waited for the weight on his back, the teeth in his throat, the thrusting cock, and when it happened, he sent his mind far away, to another time, when he had soared above the forest canopy in a dream that felt like freedom.

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CHAPTER 8



Eroan

THE WAR COUNCIL consisted of assassins from across the lands, chosen by their village elders and sent to Ashford, and Eroan was among them. In the days that followed, they spoke of how weapons were being tested with Eroan's dragon-teeth designs. Days quickly turned to weeks.

"I'm afraid we can only do so much." Others around the table nodded their agreement with Alador, the male who had spoken. An elf as old as oak, as old as any elf Eroan had known. Older than Xena, and likely just as wise. With his wolf-gray hair pulled back into a tight horse-tail, he wore a heavy gray cloak and hood. When he walked to the tree in the central atrium to bathe in the light, others bowed their heads in respect. He kept his words to a minimum, but what he did say was always concise and usually right.

They tittered and tossed ideas around.

It's not enough, Eroan thought. The weapons, the meager successes. They weren't enough to make any real difference. Chipping away at the dragons never had been enough. And nothing they had said or done, had softened the dangerous edge of Eroan's thoughts. The one Seraph had sharpened, the one that told him his place was no longer here, among them, but somewhere else, in a land far away, beyond the ocean channel.

"Eroan... what do you suggest?" Alador asked.

He blinked at the faces looking to him for answers, considered his next words, and rose to his feet. "There is no use in attacking the tower without a substantial force alongside us. Dragonkin numbers are almost immeasurable. When we strike, we do so with everything we have. And to that end, I volunteer to return to France and rally the humans. We can't succeed without them."

To their credit, they didn't lose their composure like the villagers of Cheen would have. But stern-faced Order elves looked back at him. Elves who had trained to die for their cause, elves who lived and breathed the art of violence against the dragonkin.

The silence was so thick it was almost painful.

Alador broke it, his measured voice a throaty rumble. "The last time we trusted humans, we lost everything."

"That is true, but that was many generations ago. The humans recognize their mistake. I partnered with them at the bronze wall and the wall fell. We are stronger together."

"Their *mistake* made the dragons stronger. In case you had forgotten your lessons, Eroan, or perhaps you are too young to care about our ancestral past, but the humans unleashed their nuclear bomb on the dragons, causing this jeweled mutation we battle with today. The jeweled dragons wouldn't have existed at all if not for their haste to throw more fuel on the fire. Their inventions, their tools, their methods... it is not our way."

Alador held Eroan's gaze to the point where Eroan wondered if there was more to the elder's denial than stubbornness.

"What choice do we have?" Eroan asked.

"We could strike in smaller cells, pick the dragons off one by one," came an accented female voice.

"And lose the element of surprise?" Eroan asked her, then skimmed the grim faces around him.

"And survive." Alador's eyes were cold, flat. They reminded Eroan of his own. This elder would not be easily swayed.

"With human numbers bolstering our own, we can turn the tide of this war."

"The humans assured us of victory once before." He breathed in and slowly sighed. "They abandoned us this side of the channel. Thousands died. They are responsible for more elven deaths than any dragon since."

He had been there, Eroan realized. The steady depth of Alador's gaze, the quiet, measured way he spoke. He was holding himself in restraint because he'd witnessed the infamous battle that had torn elves from humans. Elves could live many seasons, just so long as their life strings weren't prematurely cut. For Alador the human betrayal wasn't a distant story, it was his life. Alumn, he was as old as the Ashford tree, maybe as old as Cheen's memorial tree.

Briefly, doubt nipped at Eroan's resolve. If Alador thought him wrong, then perhaps he *was* wrong. But he'd seen the humans fight. They were ingenious, and as courageous as any elf.

Agreeing murmurs grew louder. Eroan was losing them. "I have worked among them. Some are still reckless, but others are honorable and brave. We would be fools ourselves to dismiss them when our numbers are so few —"

"Your insight is appreciated." Alador interrupted. "But the decision must be a group one."

The vote failed. Eroan had known it would. The rift between elves and humans still remained and it would take more than the victory at the bronze wall to heal it.

He dismissed himself from the proceedings and returned to his room. After bundling up his traveling kit, weapons, and coat, he knocked on Nye's adjacent door.

Nye opened the door shirtless, blinking sleep-weary eyes. "What is it?" He ruffled a hand through his hair.

Eroan stalled, his mind eagerly recalling the many times he'd woken with Nye looking just as bedraggled beside him and how they'd shared those sleepy mornings together. "It's late... I didn't realize..." He'd been so caught up in the Order proceeding's he hadn't stopped to think about the practicalities of leaving at night.

Nye rubbed a hand down his face, noticing Eroan's coat and bag. "What happened?"

"Nothing. That's the problem. I'm leaving. You can sta—"

"Now?" Nye turned away from the door, threw on a shirt and gathered his bag. "Why now?"

The door on the room next to Nye's creaked opened and Seraph appeared, already in her coat and boots. Listening-in again. Eroan tossed her a thankful smile. She adjusted her bag and sword and grinned back.

“We need help,” he told them both, “whether the Order will admit it or not. I have some... ideas. But first, we’ll return to Cheen.”

Nye tugged on his coat and flicked his hair up, out of the collar. He still looked bed-ridden and mildly dazed. “The humans?” Nye guessed.

“You’re going to France?” Seraph’s tone jumped, her eagerness showing.

“Yes.”

“For Lysander?”

“Not for him—”

Nye’s brow furrowed.

“But you’ll try?” she asked.

“The prince?” Nye grimaced, tossing his bag onto his shoulder. “Seraph, your fixation with this dragon is disturbing. It’s a matter I’ll be discussing with Curan on our return. I’ve heard it’s not uncommon for victims to get attached to their captors...” Nye trailed off under Eroan’s glare. “... that is, if you mention him again,” he back-tracked. “If not, I’ll forget the matter.”

Seraph stared at Eroan, waiting for his answer. When Nye pushed ahead of them, Eroan nodded, short and sharp. Hope lit up Seraph’s face.

She nudged him in the arm and whispered, “You’re going for Lysander?”

She knew him too well. “I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t.”

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CHAPTER 9



Eroan

TEN DAYS LATER, Eroan left Nye and Seraph at Cheen, slipping out in the dead of night to avoid either of them insisting they accompany him to France. Both were still likely to try and follow him, so he made sure to muddy his tracks and traveled through the night, without rest, until he came upon the abandoned bronze wall. Exposed to the elements, and with no dragons to repair the gaping holes, the bronze warren and surrounding battlements had fallen into decline. Eroan had expected to encounter some resistance, but the skies were clear and the dragons long gone.

A discarded skiff on the shoreline provided him the means to row the thirty or so miles from shore to shore. The return journey to France had been far easier than he'd expected, but its ease set his nerves on edge. There had been no reply from the last message into human territory and no dragons at the wall. The signs were ominous, and as Eroan trekked the last few miles to Chloe's outpost, it became clear why.

The acrid smell of ash in the air was the first indication all was not well, and as he approached, the outline of crumbled buildings and piles of rubble told the rest of the story. He'd expected some human losses since the assault on the wall, but not total devastation.

Toeing through the debris uncovered scorched bones and little else. No entire bodies. The fires had been so hot the flames had devoured most of the

remains. Or perhaps dragons had.

Inside the warehouse where he'd expected to find the dragon-sized cage, mangled iron bars lay strewn across the floor. Their angle suggested the cage had been blown apart from the inside.

Eroan wandered through the debris, shifting aside fallen roofing sheets. The far end of the warehouse lay open to the elements, the roof and walls collapsed. His eye snagged on patches of dark marking the floor. Old blood. Something terrible had happened here.

He turned the evidence over in his mind. The dragon they'd kept inside the cage had shifted and escaped, laying waste to the entire outpost, killing dozens, maybe more. Maybe all of them.

Had Lysander done all this?

He swallowed, tasting ash.

There had been many times in the tower when he'd have gladly killed every dragon he could have gotten his hands on. He had willingly and ruthlessly cut through many during his escape. Could he blame Lysander for doing the same to his human captors?

A part of him didn't believe it, but how well did he know Lysander? They had shared little more than fleeting moments fraught with risk. He'd deliberately used the prince to get to the queen. What was to say Lysander's motives for freeing Eroan weren't similarly self-serving? What if Lysander *was* dragon and Eroan had fallen for the act and now here he was, hundreds of miles from his own land and people because of a gut feeling?

Disturbed crows cawed outside the warehouse. Cracking open the door, he freed the dragonblade and peered through. A human woman wandered the road running between abandoned buildings. Her hair was shorter than he remembered and as she turned her head toward the fields, he spotted a bandage on the side of her neck. Chloe. Eroan scanned behind her, waiting for others of her pride to emerge. None did. She stumbled and almost fell.

Opening the door, he whistled.

She looked up. Through the soot and dust blackening her face, he couldn't make out her expression.

Eroan sheathed his blade and approached. "Chloe? What happened here?"

Her face fell, and then the rest of her fell too. He caught her and sank to his knees, clutching her close as she trembled and sobbed.

"Bronze..." she said. "It was bronze..."



“I’M sorry you came for nothing.” Chloe picked at her roasted chicken bone, her face turned downward, lit only by shifting campfire light. The same light made shadows dance on the walls of the abandoned building they now sheltered in. A lazy line of campfire smoke drifted skyward through the gaping hole in the roof.

“I’m sorry I was too late,” Eroan replied, wanting to say more but unable to find the words. He poked the remains of his roasted chicken around on the piece of slate he’d used as a plate, looking for his appetite.

The time he’d spent in Ashford had been necessary, but if he had left just a few weeks earlier he could have been here, could have tried to save her people. The restlessness, the need to move on: Alumn had shown him his place had been elsewhere and he’d ignored the feeling.

Chloe tossed her finished bone onto the fire and looked up. Her tears had dried, but their tracks still showed through the soot. “We can’t save everyone.”

“That won’t stop me from trying.”

She smiled at his defiance, though there seemed little to smile about. “There is nothing you could have done. The bronze chief was...” Her gaze defocused. “Everything we fired at him just...” she skimmed one hand against the other, “ricocheted off. He was... *le tempête*,” she tried again to find a word he’d know, “a wild storm.”

Eroan stayed quiet. Having been at the mercy of the bronze, he could readily imagine what it was like to face a beast like Dokul. The bronze were bigger than amethysts, heavier too. Slower, but more armored to compensate. Before the assault on the beach, Eroan had never killed one. The beach had only been a success because they caught the bronze brood unaware. Facing a fully-armored bronze flight? There was only ever going to be one outcome. It was a miracle Chloe had survived.

“He did this.” She pulled her collar away from her neck, exposing the medical gauze. “He’d have done more if Lysander hadn’t been there.”

Eroan slowly swallowed a bite of chicken. It went down hard. He’d been waiting to ask about Lysander, but the right moment had eluded him. Part of him didn’t want to know what had happened, fearing the worst. If he didn’t know, then he still had hope. Chloe’s next words might end that hope.

“What he did to Lysander was worse,” she whispered.

Eroan's instincts knotted. "Why didn't you kill Lysander on the beach that day?" He wasn't sure if he'd buried the quiver in his voice.

She looked up, eyes widened in surprise. "I saw an opportunity. I didn't know he... you and he were friends."

Friends? He didn't think they were that, but he'd spent so long deliberately not thinking about Lysander that his own feelings toward the dragon were a muddle he dared not untangle.

"How could I know? You're..." she waved a hand at him. "... you're you and he's dragon. He was the only dragon in human form and my only chance to capture one." Her tone pitched high, teetering on distress. "If I'd known he wasn't like the rest, I wouldn't ha—"

"It's all right. The mistake was mine that day, not yours." *Kill him. Make him suffer.* "What happened with Dokul?"

Her gaze shifted again, glazing over. "I should have let him out. He told me... I did not believe the things he said. Dragons have always lied. They are monsters. Trusting him would have been foolish..." She paused. Eroan let her settle her thoughts. "The bronze wanted him. I just... I..." Her voice cracked.

Every pause, every hitch in her voice, drove a new guilty nail home, making Eroan wince.

"He was a bronze now, Lysander Bronze, so we assumed that meant they were family—a brood, that they cared for him, and that's why the chief was looking for him." She laughed. The short, sharp sound echoed off the walls, but there was no humor in it.

He couldn't blame her for keeping Lysander in her cage or for what had happened after. "Dragons don't care like we do," Eroan said quietly. "What did Dokul do to him?"

"H-He tried to rape him, right inside the cage. Lysander fought him but... There was no way out. *Mon dieu*, I could not reach him..." She brushed back her bangs, fingers shaking. "I've never seen anything so animal before, not even from them. They both turned dragon in the cage. Broke its bars open. *C'est horrible... vicieux*. They tore half the warehouse down and..."

Eroan closed his eyes. This would be the moment she said Lysander was dead, that Eroan had been too late. He knew—inside, he already knew...

"Dokul had him anyway, pinned him down and... He tried to get away, but the bronze is..." She shook her head. "*C'est un démon inarrêtable avec*

le visage de la mort. When it was over, Dokul took him away.”

Her words sank in like a barbed hook and rooted there. “Lysander’s alive?”

“*Oui.*”

A silence settled over Eroan’s thoughts, turning them icy. He’d known what would happen if Dokul caught Lysander. Seraph had told him as much. He’d been a victim of bronze brutality. All this time, he’d known Lysander’s fate... and he’d waited, trying to convince elves to do the right thing—trying to convince himself he’d been doing the right thing.

“Where are the bronze now, do you know?” he sounded distant, as though the words belonged to someone else. Icy rage crackled and hissed inside his head. All Lysander’s life, he’d been abused. Eroan had known that much from everything he’d witnessed in the tower, and now Elisandra was gone, still the abuse continued. *No one has cut my ropes.*

“I know where they are, you cannot miss them in daylight, they’re a swarm of hornets from a distance. But as for where Lysander is ... he was hurt... bleeding. They eat their weak...” She swallowed hard. “I keep telling myself he’s still just dragon, that what I saw was normal for them. They’re all the same, aren’t they?”

“No.” Anger grated at the edges of the word.

Chloe sniffed and looked up, right at him. “You told me a dragon helped you once. It was him, wasn’t it?”

He set the make-do plate down by his boots and reaching over his shoulder, he pulled the dragonblade free. “Lysander helped me and others in countless ways. This sword is—was his.”

Tears brimmed her eyes. She muttered something in her language, words Eroan didn’t understand, but when her tears fell, he didn’t need to understand her words.

“He said you knew him. I called him a liar... Everything he said was true. I was so stupid. He begged me to free him. He’s dragon, I kept telling myself that he’s dragon, and not to trust him because of that.” She flicked her tears away. “Eroan, on the beach, you said to kill him?”

“A mistake.” The words tasted foul. “Don’t misunderstand me. I’ll kill any dragon I can, just not him.” To hear it out loud... it sounded right, just like Seraph had said it would. He’d been a fool to ignore his own instincts, to deny the way he felt when he thought back on Lysander. Maybe he still wanted to believe that the feelings he had for the dragon weren’t real, but at

the very least, he owed Lysander more. As soon as he'd handed over the information to Ashford he should have turned on his heel and made for France, saving weeks, saving people, and maybe saving Lysander from Dokul.

But it wasn't over. He'd find the nest, find Lysander, somehow help him... He knew now, in that part of him he trusted, that saving the prince was the right thing to do.

"We found Gabe, my father, on the beach," Chloe was saying, "he survived for a little while..." She smiled fondly, her memories warming. "He spoke of you, in the end. Said you would bring change to both sides."

The memories of her father were warm ones for him too. The old human had been more open-minded than most elves. "I have tried but change is not easy..."

"I'm sorry I cannot be of more help," she said. "Everyone was killed, I only survived because Dokul got what he wanted. Now we're gone, the remaining outposts will move their operations, so they're not compromised. I'd take you to them, but I don't know how to find them."

Finding humans to fight alongside elves would be a task for another time. He had a dragon to save. "Tomorrow, at dawn, will you take me to see the bronze nest?"

"*Oui*, but you can't get close without being seen."

He'd find a way, he wasn't leaving France until it was done.



THE VAST ROLLING grass plains made the bronze flights easy to spot. A swift wind rippled the grass heads toward where Eroan and Chloe crouched in the dip of an old track, pushing their scents away from the horde. Birds chirped nearby, but most sounds were the barks and yips of dragoncalls.

Chloe handed Eroan her spyglass. He propped himself onto his elbows and peered through the ingenious contraption that brought the dragons much closer.

"See them?" she asked.

He did. Dozens of bronze. Some in the sky, some fighting over the carcass of something that had died a while ago and no longer resembled whatever it had been while living. Others lay coiled in a nest, a collection of

heads and tails and the occasional stretched wing. Among bits of metal debris, teeth flashed and scales shined. The entire nest seemed unruly and chaotic. There were too many to tackle head-on.

"I don't see Lysander though," Chloe added.

Eroan scanned the mass of beasts. Their colors ranged from brown to tarnished gold, and any shade between. Lysander's green scales would have been instantly recognizable.

He wasn't there. "No."

But he did see the biggest dragon he'd ever lain eyes on. At least twice the size of the lowers, the creature lifted its head from deep within the nest and yawned wide, its gaping mouth large enough to swallow one of the humans' wheeled machines. Eroan had only seen Dokul in his human form but there was no mistaking the absolute bulk of raw muscle as the bronze chief. "But I see their leader."

Chloe stilled.

He handed the spyglass back and watched the now-smaller dragons come and go, specks in the sky. "Lysander's not among them."

She raised the spyglass and observed them again. "He's not dead. We'd have seen the body."

"Do you know if they bury their dead, like some of the amethyst do?"

"They don't seem to, but we've never seen inside their warren and I haven't observed them gather so openly like this before to know their inner workings."

"Perhaps he escaped."

Chloe lowered the glass and turned to look at Eroan. "You saw his wing?"

Eroan dropped his gaze. The chances of Lysander escaping were slim to zero. "He could have shifted and slipped away?"

"It is... possible."

But unlikely, he heard. "Go, there's no use us both being out here. I'll watch them some more."

"I'll stay." She handed the glass back. "I have nowhere else to go."

Eroan observed their comings and goings until his body ached from lying flat on the ground and the light had dropped low behind far hills. Twilight saw the big bronze climb from the nest and shake sleep off, then spread his wings and take to the skies, dwarfing all others already airborne.

He headed north and only when he was out of sight did Eroan breathe again.

He nudged the dosing Chloe awake.

She jolted and rubbed at her eyes. "Anything?"

He shook his head. There had been cycles to their movements. They never left alone and preferred to fly out in flights of three or four. The smaller, lower beasts did most of the fetching and carrying of fish or roaming livestock while the bigger bronze seemed to prefer to lay about and do little else. Nightfall might bring different behavior. But if Lysander were here, they'd have seen him.

There was no point in staying any longer. "He's not among them. We should leave."

"Wait... hand me the glass." She took the glass off him and held it up, adjusting the sights. "There... look."

He took the glass again but saw only the same heaving mass of dragons as before. "What am I looking for?"

"Wait... look deeper in the nest."

A flash of green among gold.

Eroan steadied the glass, focusing toward the back of the nest where one of the bronze appeared to be caught in a scuffle. The beast flailed, wings flapping, clearly disturbed, and there, in front of it, almost completely hidden by the commotion, was a mass of glassy-green scales. The dragon lay low in the nest, almost buried.

"*Alumn...*" Eroan breathed.

"Is it him?"

"I can't tell." The bronze was snapping and snarling, upsetting the rest of the brood, but the emerald lay still. It had its jaw open, teeth bared in a clear signal to back off. If Eroan could see its wing, he'd know.

More squabbling started until the entire nest was upset. Half of them decided to take flight, blocking Eroan's view for a few moments. Once the dragons cleared, he saw why the bronze had fled. The emerald had torn into the troublemaker and pinned it beneath his claws, either dead or dying. The emerald's snout and teeth glistened scarlet with blood. And the wing, Eroan saw, lay clamped against its side, twisted along its main branch.

"It's him." He hadn't expected the sight of a dragon to ever kick him in the chest in the same way seeing Lysander did. He watched him a while, watched him guard his kill like a trophy to ward off the others. Lowers

snuffled and yipped around him but didn't venture closer. Lysander was a survivor.

"Do you have any of your mechanical vehicles left?" he asked.

"Dokul burned all the cars."

"Explosives?"

"Some, but not many, not enough to do any real damage to them. Why?"

"We need a distraction. Something to tempt them all away."

The bronze chief flew in low and alighted nearby, scattering his brood from his path. What little sunlight was left sparked off the male's scales, briefly blinding Eroan through the glass. When he looked again, Lysander had his head down, jaws open, and appeared to be guarding his kill, but the position was clearly a submissive one. Dokul's upper lip rippled, and although Eroan couldn't hear the snarl, he imagined it readily enough. The bronze drew his head back, lips pulling back, showing all his teeth, then he plunged in, tore the carcass from Lysander's grasp and tossed it outside the nest. Lysander snapped at the beast, but the attacks weren't anything more than warning shots. The bronze settled beside Lysander, blocking him completely from Eroan's view.

The exchange hadn't looked willing.

What if he wants to be there?

"You wouldn't doubt it if you'd seen the fear on his face like I did." Chloe said, clearly seeing him hesitate. "He'd rather be dead than with them."

"If we're wrong, *we're* dead."

She sucked in a deep breath. "If I had listened to him and let him out, my friends would likely still be alive. Let me help you save him."

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CHAPTER 10



Lysander

BEING FUCKED by Dokul was one thing, but when the others decided he was fair game, Lysander reminded them exactly how he dealt with dragons who forgot their place. He might have been Dokul's bitch, but he was still the amethyst prince. Of course, killing a bronze was dragon catnip to Dokul. The bronze chief got off on murder and seeing his dead kin, or any other violent and insane thing he happened to witness. If Lysander didn't act, the lowers would fuck him. When he did act, Dokul fucked him.

The blood-soaked and odious oily taste of the chief had firmly rooted in Lysander's throat. He couldn't move for feeling *him* smothered close. The bronze was everywhere, inside Lysander's head, his thoughts, his body. He'd known what awaited him was bad, but the reality of it was a fucking never-ending nightmare. When Dokul left, the others closed in, waiting for a weakness to show itself, for Lysander to drop his head and let them have him. There was no reprieve. Day and night, he endured, until it all blurred into one long, hateful dream peppered by his mother's harsh words, "*You think you know savagery. You have no idea.*"

The bitch had been right.

He'd never given in, never let anything beat him. He'd survived Elisandra, survived the attempts to have him killed, survived everything amethyst could do, but even the worst of it hadn't been like this. He could

not give in to Dokul now. But the fight for his body was never-ending and the one in his head? That fight he feared he was losing. He'd send his thoughts far away and lay still and unfeeling, like stone. There was nowhere else for him to go but inside himself, but he could not survive there forever.

A vicious runt of a bronze with a damaged crown approached him. Every time Dokul left, this one made a move. The runt had backed off after Lysander had killed others, but he was back now, skirting the fringes of Lysander's vision, trying to place himself behind while he believed Lysander dosed. A warning growl tried to bubble up Lysander's throat. He dampened it down and stayed quiet. Clearly it was time to remind them how he'd become amethyst's flight leader. It certainly wasn't by allowing lowers to fuck him anytime they pleased.

Broken Crown slunk outside of Lysander's field of vision, though he could still see the male's tail, pressed low, and tucked among their dozing kin for camouflage. Lysander's lip quivered, instincts pushing through his restraint.

The lower struck, a clawed foot landing between Lysander's wings, his open jaws aiming straight for Lysander's throat. Rage built and snapped apart, driving Lysander's aching muscles into motion. He rolled, exposing his belly to Broken Crown's claws in a move no sane dragon would willingly execute, and used the lower's brief surprise to clamp his teeth around the beast's snout and bite down.

Claws raked at Lysander's belly. Lysander sank his teeth in harder, using the muscles at the back of his jaw to constrict his mouth and crush the runt's nose, one bone-snapping break at a time.

Fire leaked from between the lower's teeth, sizzling against Lysander's tongue. The lower heaved, grunted, scrabbled in his panic to get free, and all it did was give Lysander's curved teeth better purchase. Deeper and deeper, Lysander crushed, until the lower stopped fighting altogether.

It wasn't over.

The others were awake, dozens of pairs of golden eyes trained on Lysander, to fuck or to kill. They hissed and spat their displeasure at one of their own being killed by an amethyst.

Lysander twisted, dropping Broken Crown's panting body between himself and them, then planted a foot on the lower's back, clamped his jaws around a wing, and ripped it free to the sounds of wrenching flesh and popping bone.

The lower might have screamed had his mouthparts not been too ruined to vocalize the sound. The mangled noises he ended up making sent half the brood scattering.

Lysander wasn't done.

He hooked his claws into the creature's belly and sliced, spilling the beast's stinking, hot insides among them all. The remaining lowers barked and yipped, snapping back at him, fearful and angry. Lysander finally let his growl bubble free, then sank his teeth into Broken Crown's throat and tore the column of muscle and sinew free.

Dokul would approve of the bloodbath he now rolled in. That realization soured the victory and made anger fray his thoughts. Maybe he could kill them all and see how Dokul reacted then.

He lunged at the nearest one in the nest and sent it flailing into the field. Then another, when it tried to stalk around him. Most took to the air, where he couldn't reach them. He spread his one good wing anyway and snapped at them as they mobbed him from above. Their screams and calls filled his head, driving his mind to madness.

Fire churned low in his throat. Fire and hate and disgust, and with it came the furious raw power he'd felt when killing Elisandra. It lit him up inside, made him burn like he *was* fire. He freed the flame, fanning it far and wide, setting the grass ablaze and curtains of heat haze and smoke into the air.

Lysander didn't hear or scent Dokul until it was too late. He saw the flash of golden wings through the fire and turned too late to defend himself from the claws and teeth that sunk into his back, dislodging scales and pinching his spine. Then the chief was smothered everywhere, wings spread, burying Lysander beneath everything Dokul. The anger and power spluttered and fled, his fight broken.

And so the nightmare began again.

He didn't know how long it lasted this time. The hours didn't pass like they used to.

When an explosion sounded, Lysander was lost in that nowhere place where the pain couldn't touch him. He registered the ground trembling and the burst of light but ignored it until Dokul stirred beside him and barked an alarm that sent the brood skyward.

Then the chief was gone too, and for a few blissful seconds, he could breathe easier. Until the few remaining lowers began to close in.

CHAPTER 11



Eroan

WHEN CHLOE'S EXPLOSIVE DETONATED, the sound thundered across the open plains, just as she'd said it would.

Eroan lay low in the tall grass, as close as he dared get to the nest, and watched with the spyglass as the dragons burst into the skies. Dokul's head appeared over the crater's edge, then his wings spread, encompassing the entire nest, and he launched himself into the skies.

Eroan shifted onto his feet and cut low through the tall grass, heart pounding. The late evening light would keep him in shadow until the scorched and smoking last hundred meters.

Dragon calls sounded above and behind him, toward Chloe's outpost. By now, she'd safely be in hiding. But he didn't have long before the brood returned.

This is madness, the voice of doubt niggled at him. *He* was clearly insane because no elf in their right mind would do what he was about to.

The tall grass abruptly ended in singed tufts. Lysander's huge mass of green scales was now clearly visible in the nest, surrounded by four bronze brutes.

Eroan gritted his teeth and clutched the dragonblade at his side. *Madness.*

He'd come all this way. He wasn't leaving until it was done.

He bolted out of the grass and sprinted across the blackened earth. Ash and embers smoked around him. A dragon—one he hadn't seen or hadn't been there moments before—galloped closer, its golden eyes fixed on Eroan.

He ran harder, lungs ablaze, legs pumping. These were either his last moments alive or the most foolish moments of his life. Maybe both.

The ridge around the nest was a few strides ahead.

Dragon jaws snapped together inches behind him, so loud and close, a bolt of adrenaline soared through Eroan's veins. He vaulted over the nest's edge and skidded into the pit, landing crouched, pinned beneath the sudden collective gazes of four dragons. He'd hoped for less of them, but he'd killed more in the past, just not all at once. Or on his own.

Madness.

He straightened, his blood on fire, mind sharp. He lived to kill these monsters and none would escape him today.

"My name is Eroan Ilanea." He flexed his grip on the sword, swallowed the ash-coated choking knot in his throat and narrowed his eyes. "And that emerald dragon is mine."

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CHAPTER 12



Lysander

LYSANDER HEARD WORDS. They made no sense, not least because they came from a tall, angry elf, but it didn't matter, the dragons had all turned their backs on him and that would be their last mistake.

He let loose the reins on his rage and attacked. The first went down after a swift bite to the neck severed its spine. The second was on him in a blur, all snapping jaws and tearing claws, but as it was the smaller of the brood, Lysander easily sank his teeth in and tore it free, flinging it outside the nest. The third, a female, moved fast for a bronze. Lysander snagged her wing, tearing through the membrane before yanking her into his waiting jaws. She went down twitching. The fourth seemed to be distracted by the elf. It was all the hesitation he needed to pounce on its back and sink into the soft spot behind its crown, leaving it paralyzed and on its way to death.

He didn't see the fifth until it was almost on the elf. The blond-haired sword-wielding elf flitted out of the path of a huge swipe, catching the beast in an upward slice of his blade—a blade that shook loose a memory in Lysander's mind—but there was no time to think on it. The fifth dragon reared, narrowing in on the elf for the final bite, when Lysander turned his head and plowed into the bronze, sending it skidding into the burned grass.

Clouds of dust and ash rolled skyward, obscuring the view of the returning brood.

Panting and maddened by the kills, he waited for more dragons to lunge out of the dust clouds. But none came.

The call of the nearest, still a mile out, signaled it wouldn't be back for a few minutes. He was alone for the first time in what felt like forever.

No, not alone.

He swung his head around and bared his teeth at the elf, rumbling a warning low in his throat. The little creature stared up at him, sword in hand, sky-blue eyes wide.

Prey.

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CHAPTER 13



Eroan

UP CLOSE, as dragon, Lysander was everything Eroan's life-long training demanded he kill, and when Lysander's green eyes fixed on Eroan, narrowing into slits, for a terrible, breathless moment, Eroan's heart stopped. He'd made a terrible mistake. Whatever was left of Lysander behind those dragon-eyes, he didn't recognize Eroan, or didn't care.

These would be Eroan's final moments after all.

He lowered his sword, heart sinking with it. *Alumn, I was too late.*

A growl trembled through the beast's chest and bubbled up his long neck, burling through his tight lips. A warning. A threat. Any second, he would lunge and it would be over.

Then what was the point of all of this if this was how it ended? The people he'd lost, the battles he'd fought, surviving the dragons as a child, and grown, ... for what?

"Shift," Eroan said, voice hard. This would not be how it ended.

Lysander lowered his head. His lips rippled, the growl growing deadly.

"Shift now."

Dragon calls rolled across the plains. The bronze would be on them soon and all would be lost. He had to reach Lysander now.

The beast's whiskered chin rubbed at the ground, bringing its snout within arm's length. Lysander's huge head was all he could see. The

gnarled, rough skin, the long, shining teeth, and a crown of bone made for a prince. Eroan's heart beat too hard and too fast. He should run, but his whole world had become this moment, focused on green gem-like eyes. The stench of dragon-blood burned the back of his throat. A reek he knew all too well. But he would not step back, he would not give in. He had not come here to be turned away. *Until it is done.*

The snout came so close, Eroan's racing breaths would surely trigger the creature's instincts to hunt. He briefly closed his eyes. *Alumn, guide me.* Lysander's snout shoved him in the chest, knocking him back a step. Eroan opened his eyes. *Teeth.* Close racks of teeth, each one half Eroan's size and capable of slicing him in two.

Lysander huffed, blasting him with hot air, the meaning clear: Back off. But it was Lysander who eased back, stare pinned on Eroan.

Eroan bared his teeth. "You know who I am," he lifted his free hand, still clutching the sword in the other, and reached out, fingers trembling. The lattice of scale on Lysander's nose shined like it was wet and cold, but when his fingers touched those scales, they were rough, dry, and curiously warm. He spread his touch, absorbing the warmth and feel of dragon beneath his hand.

Lysander's eyes suddenly flared. With a jolt, he jerked backward, lifting his head high, as though he might flee or strike. Fire glowed behind the scales low in his throat, filling the firepit. The touch had startled him.

Eroan's heart stammered. "You know me, dragon!" he barked, using the same tone he'd take with young, unruly elflings. "You hear me. I'm cutting your ropes."

Light blasted hot and white, scorching Eroan's eyes. He staggered, and when the flare faded, Lysander was on his knees as man, head bowed, shoulders heaving with his every labored breath. He tried to stand, got a leg under him, then stumbled onto his hands. His long mane of knotted hair fell forward, his shirt gaped, clothes filthy and torn.

Dragons screeched. Coming closer.

Lysander flinched and slowly lifted his head. Pain clouded his green eyes and twisted his face. "Eroan?"

Eroan lunged in and heaved Lysander to his feet, bearing his weight. Lysander's weak fingers slid around Eroan's waist and clamped on.

"There's... no way out," he said. The broken, wrecked growl of a voice sounded nothing like Eroan remembered.

“Hold on to me. Don’t look back. I have you.”

Lysander’s weight grew heavier, his steps messier, and it was all Eroan could do to keep him moving forward. If they were spotted now, there was nothing else he could do to save Lysander or himself.

Alumn, if there is any hope left in this world, help me save this dragon.

The calls grew louder, closing in, coming faster.

Clouds of ash thrown up from their battle began to settle.

One step. Another. Following his earlier path through the grass. They just needed some hope and a little luck. Wasn’t it time Alumn favored him with a chance?

“Just a few more steps...” he whispered. He could do this. He had to do this.

Lysander growled something in reply, the words indecipherable.

In the tall grass, Eroan eased Lysander over a small ridge in the earth and pulled him down to his knees. The dragon’s lashes fluttered, but his gaze was unseeing, his mind somewhere else.

“Lysander... you need to get down—”

A bronze screeched high above them. The sound triggered Lysander to jerk back, suddenly clawing and shoving at Eroan. Eroan grabbed his arm, trying to get him under control. Lysander broke free and twisted. Eroan snagged his wrist, but Lysander pulled, and suddenly he was up and running through the grass.

Eroan bolted after him, tackled him low in the back and knocked him hard to the ground. Lysander writhed beneath him, grappling Eroan’s hands, trying to shove him off. Wide, panicked eyes still didn’t see.

“Stop...” Eroan pinned his wrists. Lysander tore his right arm free. A sloppy punch hit Eroan square in the jaw. Eroan grabbed that flailing arm, pinned it again, and pushed in, making it so Lysander saw only his face. Nothing else. No dragons. Just him. Breathing hard, he clamped Lysander still. “I need you to stop fighting me.”

Panting through his nose, chest heaving, Lysander glared back until, second by second, the madness clouding his eyes thawed. “Eroan?” he croaked.

“Are you going to run?”

Mouth open, he seemed to be trying to say something, but failed.

“Keep your head down.” Eroan eased off and, grabbing Lysander’s hand, pulled him into a crouch. “Follow me. Can you do that?”

Lysander followed, still breathing too hard and on the edge of panic, but he was here, in this moment, and thinking, not running.

Eroan grabbed the wooden pallet he'd used earlier to hide the hole dug into the ground and pulled it aside. "We're getting inside. We'll be safe. Do you understand?"

Lysander's gaze darted, nostrils flaring, and Eroan wondered if he might shift again, right there. He grabbed the prince's jaw in a firm hold and held him still, forcing him to see only Eroan. "Trust me. I won't let anything happen to you."

Lysander's eyes glazed over, his focus shifting, mind wandering. He was going into shock. With a curse, Eroan pulled Lysander close, maneuvered himself and Lysander deep into the hole, and pulled the pallet over them, sealing them in the dark.

Dragons cawed and barked, and among them, the bronze chief's ground-shuddering roars were the loudest, sending shivers spilling through Lysander. Eroan closed his arms around Lysander, tucking the prince beneath his chin, so close Lysander's trembling became his own. If he could have shared the burden, he would have, but now, all he could do was hold him and hope that was enough.

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CHAPTER 14



Lysander

THE MALE ELF smelled of freedom, of the forest, of good things. He did not smell of dragon.

Lysander dug his fingers in—not claws; he didn’t want to hurt this one—and breathed in the smell of elf. The strong arms folded around him wouldn’t let go. He trusted that. Trusted him. When the shaking started, the arms tightened and Lysander pulled him closer, wanting to hide inside this safe place and never leave.

“I have you,” a voice rumbled in the closed, quiet place.

Those three small words broke him open, laying him bare. And for the first time in a long time, living no longer hurt.

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CHAPTER 15



Eroan

IN THE EARLY HOURS, when dawn was still a hint on the horizon and the night at its coldest, Eroan moved to another hole in the ground. Their escape couldn't be rushed. Dokul would search far and wide for Lysander, forgetting to look closer to his own nesting site—or so Eroan hoped.

Another few hours, another hole on the ground, leading away from the abandoned outpost to a copse of trees, then down, deeper into the hidden valley Chloe had shown him.

They weren't safe yet, but with every passing hour, their chances increased.

Lysander hadn't spoken since the nest. He sat propped on a rock at the edge of a small, burbling stream. His filthy, torn clothes hung off him, his skin gray and his cheeks hollow. Matted knots bunched his dark hair and he clearly favored his right side. The scent of spoiled blood lingered around him, but when Eroan suggested he take a look at the wound, Lysander hadn't replied, and approaching without his permission had already triggered him to fight or flee more than once.

"We need to keep moving." Eroan took a broad laurel leaf and dipped it in the stream, cupping water inside. He handed it back to Lysander.

Lysander blinked at it.

"Drink."

And blinked again. He swallowed, wet his cracked lips, only then noticing Eroan. His expression broke for a moment, twisting in confusion.

“Drink,” Eroan urged again.

Lysander took the offered leaf, sniffed at the water, his eyes watching for any trick. Eroan nodded encouragement. The way Lysander moved, his eyes darting and body cumbersome as though he didn’t fit inside the flesh, Lysander’s dragon-self remained close.

Finally accepting Eroan wasn’t about to poison him, he lifted the leaf and swallowed, spilling some water from the corners of his mouth and down his chin. He brushed the wetness off with a sweep of his hand, smearing dirt.

“I er...” The words were a growl. Lysander coughed and cleared his throat. “I... I’ve been dragon so long... speaking...” His voice broke. He winced. “It’s taking ... time to come back.”

“You don’t need to explain.” Eroan refilled the leaf, handed it back, and watched Lysander readily drink. He reached out for the leaf again, but Lysander had frozen, staring back at him, his mud-smeared brow furrowing.

“We need to move again,” Eroan explained. “Deeper into the valley. There’s a ruined farmhouse. Chloe will meet us there.”

“Chloe?” Lysander asked, face vague.

“The human—”

He was on his feet suddenly and stumbling into the trees. He hit a tree trunk and fell, then retched up the water. His fingers, clasping the tree next to him, turned white.

Eroan waited. He’d seen elves deeply traumatized. Rushing him would do no good, but they did have to keep moving. When Lysander’s heaving subsided, Eroan took a wide-arc around him, approaching from the front. Slowly, carefully, he settled a hand on Lysander’s shoulder. Tremors rattled through him. He clutched at his side where damp patches of blood stained his filthy shirt.

“Let me help you.”

Lysander’s glare burned.

Eroan withdrew his hand, expecting him to shift at any second.

“We keep moving.” Lysander dragged himself to his feet. He made it another three steps before collapsing face-down in the dirt.

CHAPTER 16



Lysander

THE TOUCH OF WARM, rough hands roaming over the raw, sensitive bruise on his side, and the rumble of a deep, familiar voice roused Lysander from a dark and cold place. The voice came and went like the ebb and flow of a tide. He should know the words, they were important, but he couldn't cling to them long enough to make sense of them.

When he finally did blink awake, it was inside a room he didn't recognize. Stone walls, a roof, a fireplace. Was this even real? Piece by piece he slotted his broken thoughts back together. Was this the tower? Trying to sit set the wound on his side alight again, dropping him breathless back onto the bed.

Probing with his fingers, he found a gauze and bandage stuck to his side where he'd expected to find the deep gashes one of the lowers had left him with. He couldn't even remember which one. They'd all blurred into one long string of dragons he'd killed or tried to. All but the worst one.

Thoughts of Dokul twisted his mouth. He rolled his tongue, finding it parched, and swallowed. Shit, how long had he been out? Flopping a hand over his eyes he tried to think back and reassemble the mental wreckage from the last few days. Something about being buried alive, and hearing that same voice...

"Water?"

Lysander jumped. Fucking hell, Eroan was here. The stupid, stubborn, impossible elf was really here. He hadn't dreamed him up.

The wound barked at him to quit moving. He winced and squinted up at the very elf he'd been thinking of. Eroan looked perfectly at home standing beside the bed, cup in hand, long blond hair neatly bound in a tail slung over his shoulder and wearing earthy-colored traveling clothes.

"How long have you been standing there?" he croaked out. He had to blink again to be sure Eroan wasn't about to vanish. When he didn't disappear, Lysander awkwardly propped himself on an elbow and reached for the cup.

The elf's mouth lifted at one side. "Not long."

The water went down nice and smooth, leaving a cool, clean trail all the way to his belly. He had a feeling he'd soon wish it was wine, but water would do for now, although it wasn't going to do much for the memories crowding the back of his thoughts, waiting to pounce.

Eroan pulled up a chair and made himself comfortable. He leaned forward, resting his forearms along his thighs. Now Lysander's thoughts were coming together, he could see how Eroan's clothes were scuffed and marked in places, and how similar grazes marked the elf's chin and jaw. Dust and dirt darkened his face in places. Not so immune to everything, it seemed. How was he even here?

"How long have I been out?" Lysander set the cup down and tried to twist onto his side. The wound fired up again, dropping him back. "Damn..."

"On and off, two days."

He blinked and Eroan stood over him suddenly, face lit only by flickering candle-light. Eroan leaned in and probed at the gauze. Lysander's chest tightened with something like fear as the elf's fingers lightly brushed his lower abs and plucked at the gauze's sticky corners.

Eroan's eyebrows slightly knitted, creating a tiny, imperfect crease. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know." He had answered too quickly. It was a lie. He *had* been afraid. It was a horrible, gut-loosening fear, one he hadn't felt before. If Eroan heard the lie, he didn't react, and Lysander resigned himself to laying back and letting him do whatever he wanted. In the state he was in, he couldn't fight anyone, even if he'd wanted to.

“The wound was infected,” Eroan said. “Had you left it any longer, it would have killed you.”

Lysander breathed out a heavy sigh. Typical, it’d be something so menial that would kill him, after surviving everything else.

“You’re easier to nurse when unconscious,” Eroan added, his tone lightening.

Was that a smile on the elf’s lips? Why was he even here, in a near-derelect house hundreds of miles from his home, after he’d given the order to have Lysander killed? What was this exactly? A rescue, or something else?

A small part of his pride, whatever bits of it he had left, demanded he push the elf off and lick his wounds himself, but he found, in this quiet moment, he didn’t care what Eroan’s reasons were. Being here was better than anywhere he’d been in months. Here was safe, for now, and felt just fine a place to close his eyes and rest a little while, knowing he didn’t have to fight for his life when he next woke.

When he next looked about the room, the light had changed and the candle burned down another inch. The chair was still at the bedside, but no Eroan. He stared at the empty seat, thoughts rolling over, then poked at his side again. This time, the wound didn’t bite back. He shoved upright, using his arms to push up instead of his abs to pull and managed to prop himself into a sitting position. The room spun, vision blurring, body warring with him to lay back down and sleep, but two days’ rest was long enough. Dokul would be coming and an old building like this one would eventually draw the dragon’s eye.

Lysander found his boots and tugged them on without doing himself any further damage, then made a brave attempt to make it to the doorway. The neat little scene greeting him in the adjacent room beyond was one that took a few moments for him to unpack: Eroan, standing by the fire, arm resting on the mantle as he spoke low and quietly to Chloe, the human, seated in an armchair full of holes and spilling its fluffy filling all over the floor. They looked... familiar. Content, even. Friends. More?

Eroan looked up, concern widening his eyes before his expression settled somewhere around mildly irritated. “You shouldn’t be up.”

From his tone, he was clearly used to speaking and having others obey him.

“Yes, I am aware.” Lysander propped himself against the doorframe in the hope he didn’t give away how he was about to fall over. “Thank you. Both. But you need to leave me. When Dokul finds you, he’ll kill you.”

Chloe chewed on her thumbnail and turned her face toward the firelight. She’d seen much of what Dokul had done to him, Lysander realized. Maybe most of it, and she’d lost everything. He’d fucking warned her.

Eroan’s eyebrow lifted in question. Though Lysander had no idea what that question might be. “I didn’t run into a bronze nest only to leave you behind now,” the elf said, tone still lofty.

Lysander felt a smile lighten his lips. Eroan would be a bastard to argue with. “What you did was the height of stupidity. It’s a fucking miracle you weren’t killed.”

“I told him he’s insane,” Chloe agreed. “But he’s *Eroan Ilanea*. I don’t think he knows how to listen to anyone but his own ego.”

Eroan bowed his head and watched the firelight, the hollow of his cheek flickering.

“Why did you do it?” Lysander had to know. Nothing and nobody gave a damn about him, ever. He was a tool, a bargaining item, property to be traded. There was a reason Eroan had risked his life and it had nothing to do with *cutting his ropes*, it couldn’t. No creature was that noble. What did Eroan want?

Chloe looked up, clearly wanting an answer too.

“You ordered me dead,” Lysander pushed. “Second thoughts?”

The wince was real, pulling at Eroan’s mouth, briefly revealing a flicker of those sharp little elfen teeth.

“Make him suffer.” The words dripped from Lysander’s tongue. “I heard it all.” He shoved off the doorframe and surprised himself by managing to stay upright until he bumped into a table and used that to root him to the spot. “Well? You had a change of heart? Because from where I’m standing, none of this makes sense. Elves don’t save dragons.”

A tiny pulse twitched over Eroan’s eye, as though the words truly ate at him and it drove Lysander crazy wondering why.

“The three of us can change things,” he finally said. “Human, elf, dragon. We’re together, in this room, talking. This is change, right here. We have an opportunity.”

Right.

That had to be it.

See, too fucking noble for anything but a righteous mission from his blessed Alumn. Of course it was something reasonable like trying to talk peace or saving the fucking world by bringing them all together.

Lysander groped for an old, rotten chair and prayed it held him up when he dropped himself into it. Dust puffed into the air. He coughed and winced. His side hurt. Everything hurt. But his stupid heart hurt the most. Sweet nights, what was he thinking? That Eroan had come here for no other reason than to save him because he what... liked him? He could hear his mother's laugh and pressed a cool hand to his flushed forehead. Eroan ordered his death. He needed to get over the insane fantasy that he felt anything besides hate toward Lysander.

"You can't negotiate with dragons, if that's what you're hoping. Humans tried that a long time ago. The first great metals ate all the negotiators." He looked down and filtered his fingers through his hair, snagging on too many knots. He stank too. Of dirt and blood and worse. By the Great Ones, he was a fucking mess.

"I have to agree with the dragon," Chloe said.

Lysander threw a hand in her general direction. "The human sees sense." While they were sitting here *talking*, Dokul was closing in. He could be on them at any moment. Chloe would die after narrowly escaping him the first time and Eroan... Damn Eroan for even being here. Lysander couldn't think past him. All his thoughts hustled right back around to the elf standing across the room, still so strong and proud, like death itself couldn't touch him. But it would. If Dokul found them, knowing it had been Eroan who took Lysander away... He'd ruin Eroan in the way only the bronze could, with tooth and claw and blood.

"... Lysander?"

He looked up into two faces waiting for a reply to a question he hadn't heard. Eroan should be with his people. Chloe with hers. And Lysander... He had no people, and with only one working wing, he didn't stand a chance in the wild. Akiem should have fucking killed him when they fell from the tower.

"I don't know what you want from me." He'd meant to address both of them, but his gaze found its way to Eroan as if the male held a magical pull all of his own. Even bruised with weeks' worth of travel on him, Eroan still looked like some impossible dream. The earring high in his tipped ear winked emerald green. That was a new addition since he'd last seen him.

Lysander's thoughts fell to those final moments. Not the beach, that didn't count—his head had been covered, he'd only heard Eroan's cruel voice deliver his execution order. Before, when Eroan had been tied to Elisandra's bed, Lysander's mouth on the parts of him that were as hard as they were smooth. *Don't be sorry.*

It was all lies. Eroan had wanted to escape. Anything else was his own wishful thinking.

Too much time had passed and nobody had replied. Eroan knelt to stoke the fire, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

Maybe these two didn't know why they needed Lysander either. What good was he anyway, broken as he was?

"Are you well enough to walk?" Chloe asked.

"Maybe."

"*Bien.* We continue. There are other hidden outposts like this one with more medical supplies, some pain medication, if needed. I don't know how it'll impact a dragon but it's there, if needed." Lysander nodded his thanks and scratched at his whiskered chin. A bath was what he needed, and then a whole lot of mead and somewhere dark to curl up and lick all the hurts away.

She passed by him and out of the room. In the quiet that followed, Eroan poked the fire with a stick, dislodging the larger logs, embers sparking.

Eroan should leave now, Lysander realized. He'd come for some grand idea about uniting the three races with a warrior woman and an amethyst prince. Instead, he'd found a broken prince and a warrior woman with no warriors of her own. If he stayed with Lysander, he'd die.

"There's nothing here for you," Lysander muttered. "Go back to your people, Eroan Ilanea."

Eroan's throat bobbed as he swallowed. He tossed the stick into the fire and headed for the door, stopping beside Lysander.

Lysander stared at the flames, not wanting to see Eroan's sorry face. But he felt his closeness as a warming of the blood and with it came the memory of being held somewhere cold and dark, being buried in the ground. The smell of wildness filling his head, of cut pine and all things Eroan, and hearing the thump of the elf's strong, steady heart. By diamonds, he wanted that place to be real.

The hand suddenly on Lysander's shoulder gave a gentle squeeze, choking him up. "Don't let them break you, prince." Then, Eroan was gone too, leaving Lysander alone, watching the fire's dying light.

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CHAPTER 17



Eroan

THE DAYS LENGTHENED, heavy clouds thinned, and after every nightfall, Lysander was able to walk farther between rests. True to her word, Chloe's outposts offered safety, warmth, and a place to eat the rabbit and pheasant they caught during the day. Dragoncalls became few and far between until they stopped hearing them altogether.

"I've been thinking," Chloe began, picking up her jacket from the ground and flicking off grit and moss. Behind her, a shallow river burbled through the creek. Sunlight sparkled off its surface, making the water shine.

Eroan scanned their immediate surroundings from his vantage point atop a flat, rocky outcrop, soaking in the sun's rays while he could. They'd rested up here a while, collecting fresh water and eating what supplies they had left. The little creek was a good place to stop. Well hidden from above and their voices didn't carry far beyond the trickle of running water.

"Yesterday, we passed by some fresh boot tracks," Chloe continued. "My people are nearby. I want to head out and find them but..." She tugged the coat on and fumbled with the buttons.

Eroan knew what she would say. Her people would likely welcome him, with some caveats, but not a dragon.

"It's all right," Lysander's gravelly voice drew Eroan's eye. He leaned against the largest of the surrounding boulders. "I don't expect charity from

humans.” He’d knotted his hair in a loose bun, but long, dark strands had escaped. The warm breeze had them sweeping near his shadowed jawline. The messy appearance was a stark contrast to how Eroan remembered him in the tower, with all his fine clothing and long, carefully measured looks, giving nothing away. He wore no such looks out here and let Chloe see the solemn acceptance on his face.

Chloe’s eyes said *sorry*, but Lysander looked at the trinket he turned over and over in his hands, probably a pebble picked up off the ground. He dropped whatever it was into his pocket and straightened. “You’ve both already done enough.”

She picked up her rucksack and slung it onto her back. “But it wasn’t enough, was it...”

Lysander shrugged, making light of the past between them. He gave her a guarded look; the same one he’d used on Eroan when he didn’t like what he’d heard. “What do you want me to say?”

“I’ll ask them if they’ll take us all—”

Lysander laughed. “Given my past experience with humans, I won’t hold my breath.”

She swung a respectful nod up at Eroan. “Will you come with me?”

He cast his gaze far upstream.

There’s nothing here for you.

Lysander didn’t know how his words had cracked open Eroan’s doubts and exposed them to the harsh reality. He should go with her, help rally the humans, share knowledge and tactics and bring word of it all back to the elves. They were all stronger together.

He lifted his face to the sun. Every waking moment of his life had been devoted to one thing: destroying dragons. His target had been the queen. With her gone, his purpose was still a clear one. Keep on killing until there were no dragons left to stain his blade. It was an assassin’s duty. His duty. The desire sang in his blood. It was who he was. Eroan Ilanea, bane of dragons. The answer to Chloe’s question was simple.

“I can approach them first, if you like,” she said. “Wait here a few days and I’ll return with their answer.”

There’s nothing here for you.

“Very well,” he agreed. “I’ll wait for their answer. Two days.”

Chloe sighed, clearly relieved, and made her way to where Lysander stood. She offered her hand. “You did what no other dragon could have.

You made me see your kind as something other than monsters.”

He stilled and looked at her hand, then took it, giving it a firm squeeze, but when she tried to pull back, he held on and spoke low. “Your monsters are real and I’m one of them.” His broad smile and sudden gleam in his eyes rattled her enough that she pulled her hand free and made a hasty retreat, nodding Eroan a farewell and trekking upstream until the sight of her vanished into the trees.

“Why frighten her now?” Eroan asked. They’d been on the road for two weeks and in that time, Lysander had been nothing but kind to Chloe, if wary of the human. He’d given no sign of a threat, nothing untoward. If anything, he’d been the model patient, although worryingly subdued. Until now. Eroan had his own theory but wanted to hear the truth from Lysander.

The dragon squinted into the light bouncing off the water. “It’ll keep her alive.”

Always protecting others. And yet nobody had protected him. Eroan studied the male in the stark daylight. Any sign of his ordeal had vanished from his exterior. His clothes, cleaned and patched up along the way, fit snugly again around broad shoulders and powerful arms. If anything about him had changed it was the hardened edge to his glances and cutting tone to his words. His smile, so readily available before, was a rare thing now. The bronze had damaged him, that much was clear, but how deep did the cracks go?

Eroan hopped down from the rock and picked up a hazel branch about five feet long, likely washed up on the riverside during the last rains. He tore off any protruding twigs and tossed the branch at Lysander without warning. The dragon snatched it out of the air and raised an eyebrow.

“How’s your range of movement?” Eroan asked.

He rolled his right shoulder, stretching his wounded side. “Better.”

Eroan set the dragonblade down below the outcrop, picked up a second branch, this one longer, and snapped it underfoot. He lifted the now-shorter branch in both hands, testing its weight, then gave it a flick from one hand to the other. “You think so?”

Catching on, Lysander shrugged off his jacket and tossed it aside, then refreshed his grip on the hazel, flexing his fingers around the staff. “Rules?”

“First blood.”

The dragon’s brow arched again. His smile slid sideways. “Are you sure you want to test me? The last time we fought, I kicked your—”

Eroan struck fast, swinging the staff low to get a wide, upward tilted arc that, had it hit, would have cracked Lysander under the jaw and likely ended the fight before it had begun. Only Lysander was fast, Eroan hadn't forgotten that, and as the dragon appeared to twist away, he thrust his own makeshift staff downward in both hands, blocking Eroan's attack with a loud *crack* and holding him there.

The dragon's eyes had darkened and fixed on Eroan's and for a few moments the only sound was that of the bubbling river and their breathing. "You stopped?"

"You winced." Eroan withdrew, backing up. "You're still in pain."

"I did not wince, elf. The sun was in my eyes."

"Another day, perhaps." Eroan turned his back, ears pricked. The dragon's clumsy footing gave him away. Eroan whirled, deflecting Lysander's staff, then used the bottom section of his own to jab at Lysander's thigh. Had he been aiming to hurt, he'd have struck at where he knew the prince was wounded, and wouldn't have missed, but the jolt in the thigh was enough to pluck a hiss from between Lysander's teeth and force him back a step.

Lysander twirled the staff and circled around, grin widening.

"Don't like to be told no, *prince*?" Eroan asked.

"Just warming up. It's been a while since I've used a stick to beat an elf."

Eroan narrowed his eyes. Like that, was it? Maybe he wouldn't go so easy on the prince. "I've been meaning to ask... How many elves have you personally killed?"

Lysander's mouth ticked. "Well, if you will keep sending them over my tower walls to play with, the numbers soon add up. How many dragons have you killed?"

Eroan kept his face blank. "I don't count. A dead dragon is a good thing."

"We have that belief in common." Lysander's dark chuckle tugged on the line of wicked lust Eroan had been denying in himself since watching the prince sleep and heal, since he'd washed the wound on Lysander's side and lightly run his fingers over the ripple of Lysander's abdominal muscles, touching the forbidden in secret. It had started as nothing, a curiosity, no more. Lysander had been out cold and feverish and Eroan had only meant to clean him up and treat the wound. But what he'd felt while examining the

prone prince was more than curiosity. To touch him, it had been a visceral reaction, a deep need and a shocking attraction that had stolen his breath. And it had been wrong, he'd known it, not least because Lysander had been unaware, but it had felt too good to deny himself such wicked pleasure. That same flickering delight shortened his breaths now: the forbidden, the wrong. It had seeded in him when the queen had him tied down and Lysander's smart mouth had worked him into a creature made of panting need. That same wicked root was still knotted inside, growing, stretching, becoming more, *needing* more. Lysander was the enemy. And Eroan had never wanted to touch, taste and explore someone as much as he did him.

There's nothing here for you.

But such desires could not be made possible. He'd channel the need elsewhere, into this moment. It was as good as any, and might be their last if the humans welcomed him in.

Lysander struck, pivoting off his back foot and twisting in the air, bringing the staff down like a blade. Eroan's heart stuttered, adrenaline spiking at the last second, driving him to the side. He flicked his weapon back, blocking a second upward strike, but his balance was off and the beach rocky. He stumbled. Lysander's staff cracked down, into his shoulder, earning the hit. Eroan pulled away, forcing distance between them and room to bring his weapon in and back under control.

Lysander's open-mouthed grin was the kind seen on dragons before they went in for the kill. He barely left a moment for Eroan to catch his breath before swinging the staff overhead in an unnecessarily flashy move, one Eroan took full advantage of by jabbing the prince in the gut and kicking out, sending him staggering backward. Only Lysander wasn't the type to let a minor trip unsteady him. He turned the unbalance to his advantage, dropped low, and swung the hazel staff into Eroan's weight-bearing knee.

Eroan buckled, stabbed the staff in the beach and danced away, until finding his staff was suddenly gone—flicked out from under him. Eroan found himself on his back, staring up the length of the hazel branch pressed at his throat, into a dragon's gaze filled with cunning and delight.

"Still got it, elf."

The whole exchange had taken seconds.

But it wasn't over.

Eroan chuckled. "I went easy on you."

“That’s your mistake.” Lysander’s gaze dropped, the staff shifted, moving away from Eroan’s throat as the prince’s attention wandered down, over Eroan’s heaving chest.

Eroan waited, soaking up the warm look in Lysander’s eyes like he soaked up the sun. Then, when he was sure the dragon was fully distracted, he grabbed the end of Lysander’s staff and thrust forward, crunching the handle into Lysander’s nose. Blood bloomed. Lysander barked a curse and stumbled back, losing his staff to Eroan’s grip. His hands flew to his battered nose.

“*Gate gogs, elmf!*” He threw Eroan a glare and spat blood onto the rocks.

“First blood,” Eroan reminded, getting to his feet.

Lysander’s narrowed-eyed glare flicked to the right, to the rock Eroan had been resting on earlier and the sword beneath.

Eroan’s chest tightened. *He wouldn’t...*

Lysander bolted for the blade. Eroan lunged, the stakes suddenly higher, and Lysander had the sword in his hand. He swung, cut through the staff in a blur, and pinned Eroan back against the boulder by the tip of the blade.

The prince’s green eyes had lost all their jovial shine. There was nothing there now but cold, ruthless focus.

Eroan lifted his hands and plastered himself against the rock. Still, the blade pushed in. Its sharp edge gripped his neck, threatening to cut.

Lysander altered his grip, lifting his elbow, and leaned in. Blood ran from his nose, around his mouth and down his chin. Behind that scarlet wetness, white teeth flashed. “Why are you here?” Lysander asked, leaning in.

They’d been here before. Months ago. The queen’s chamber. Eroan’s one focus to kill the queen. Now... now he didn’t know what he was fighting for or why he was here, not really. Since the bronze wall fell, he’d been lost.

“Tell me,” the dragon prince growled. His thigh pressed against Eroan’s, then the firmness of his hip dug in until there was nothing between them but the sword and blood. A small wet drop tickled down Eroan’s neck.

“You coming here...” Lysander bowed his head, bringing his chin over the top of the blade, his face inches from Eroan’s, “... makes no sense.”

Eroan gritted his teeth. The answer was one he couldn’t speak, one he didn’t understand, but Lysander was right, it didn’t make any sense.

“Why?” Lysander growled.

Eroan tasted blood in the air, pinned as he was, smothered by dragon, the parts of his mind that had buried it all began to turn over, disturbing the past, bringing the horrors of his time in the tower back to the surface. But the heated rush through his veins had nothing to do with fear or anger, and when Lysander bared his teeth in a warning snarl, Eroan parted his lips, needing more air.

When Lysander tilted his head and brushed his cheek against Eroan’s, Eroan lost all his thoughts in the powerful feel of having him so close.

Lysander’s bloodied mouth brushed Eroan’s cheek and drifted lower, sweeping to the corner of his mouth. “What do you want from me?”

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CHAPTER 18



Lysander

OWN, take, bite, fuck. Each need thumped in time with his heart. *Own, take, bite, fuck.* The dragon was too close to the surface, muddying his thoughts. And the elf was doing all the wrong things. Even now, he still fought, his fucking silence like a bolt screwing down deeper and deeper, driving Lysander toward madness. His own blood wet his tongue. The smell of it mingling with the dribble of blood running down Eroan's neck, into his mess of blond hair braided at one shoulder.

Tilting his head, he breathed him in, drawing Eroan deep into his senses where the sensation of him sizzled, driving his stirring dick fast toward painfully hard. The blade between them was the only thing stopping him from acting on the rabid needs tearing him apart. *Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.* He pushed his hips in, biting into his lip as the pressure rubbed him the right way. Without the blade between them, this wouldn't have been as civilized.

Eroan's hard, powerful body began trembling, and it was all Lysander could do not to throw the blade away and fuck him, whether he wanted it or not. It was a madness he realized. A dangerous one.

He wasn't Dokul.

He wasn't his mother.

He wasn't some fucked-up bronze that took whatever he wanted like a rabid animal.

Oh, but he could be.

Maybe he should be.

Hadn't all the bad happened because he'd fought his nature?

What if he gave in... just stopped fighting... and became what everyone expected of him?

His mouth was at Eroan's jaw, just below his ear. If he pulled the blade free, he could sink his teeth in and own him, do what his body so desperately wanted.

Own. Blood pumping.

Take. Need raging.

Bite. Soul aching.

Fuck. Instincts demanding.

Become what he'd never been, become dragon in every way.

But the blade was there... a blade that had once been his. One of the two he'd taken from his sister's carcass. A sister, so light, so full of hope. Amalia. Blades he'd had on him constantly, blades he'd kept to remind him of how he could be, how he should be, that no matter the weight of darkness bearing down, he could never let it smother him. For Amalia, for his own soul, if he had such a thing.

He broke through the desire-filled shackles and flung himself away from Eroan, throwing the sword at the rock. It clattered and bounced, ringing its alarm.

He needed to move, to get away, to kill, to fuck, to do something to stop from going out of his damned mind. Before, he'd have taken to the skies, beat his wings and flown until there was nothing left of the madness to chase him.

The only escape was the forest. He left the beach, hesitating at the deliberate noise behind him. "Don't follow me, elf! I'll kill you if you do."

He didn't look to know if Eroan listened. The warning was enough, and he'd meant it. He stumbled on, into the trees, where the air was cooler and the sunlight fleeting. Falling back against a tree, he growled out the pain. Muscle and blood boiled. He wanted out of his skin, to shift and roar at the world.

What had Dokul done to him?

But it wasn't all Dokul. Before... there had been times he'd needed the release or he feared what he might have become without it. With Mirann,

he'd fucked her because he'd have killed her if he hadn't. He had killed Elisandra, and in that moment he hadn't felt like himself.

He dropped his hand and cupped the unrelenting erection, gasping as desire flooded low in his groin and emptied his thoughts of all the bad shit. Eyes closed, the taste of blood on his tongue and the image of Eroan firmly lodged in his mind, he freed his wretched dick and clamped it in hand. *Fuck*. He needed the madness to break apart, to free him again so he could think. The pre-slickness came quickly, easing his efforts to ride the pleasure out. Just get it done. Own. Take. Bite. *Fuck*. Sweet nights, things would be so much easier if he was like the rest of his fucked-up amethyst brood. But he didn't want to be like them...

He remembered his mouth on Eroan's silken cock, imagined the elf arching beneath him, driving his cock deeper into Lysander's throat and remembered the taste of his need. Lust coiled tight to the breaking point, and Lysander imagined, back by the river, how he would have held the elf down and fucked him every way he could, made him come, screaming for more. Pleasure built in its final moments, Lysander's hand pumping harder, tighter, to the point of pain. Then it burst, free, unspooling, waves of mind-numbing ecstasy rolling up his spine, spilling bouts of hot seed onto the forest floor. Own. His cock pulsed. Take. His heart thumped. Bite. Hips jolted. *Fuck*. His mind cleared, dumping him in the reality of how close he'd come to destroying the only thing in this wretched world he loved. Eroan Ilanea.



CHLOE RETURNED A DAY LATER, talking beside the water with Eroan where the sound of the river muffled their voices. Lysander lay back on a sun-baked rock, resigning himself to the fact Eroan would leave with her—as he should, especially after Lysander had fucked up their not-so-friendly sparring session the day before. At least Eroan hadn't seen him jerk off in the woods like some rampant bronze.

Anxiety nibbled on his nerves, and with it, the fluttering of his heart, like panic, was setting in. He knew the signs. Fight or flight. Since Dokul, his entire body had been a treacherous wreck of sickness, doubt, weakness

and a fuckload of other shit he'd once dealt with by drinking copious amount of wine, or mead, he wasn't fussy.

You think you know savagery. You have no idea.

A cloud lumbered its way in front of the sun, chilling the spring air. Lysander turned his head and watched an elf and human discuss their future.

It wasn't so bad. There were other dragons in this land. He'd occasionally caught their light scent on the breeze. They smelled different from amethyst and bronze. Nothing close enough to worry those two with it. Maybe these different dragons would be open to taking in a lost amethyst prince? Or maybe he could pretend to be a lower and hide among the working ranks. Easier said than done with scales as green as grass. Right now, he didn't have a whole lot of other options.

Chloe and Eroan embraced and Lysander's withered heart flipped over. This would be it, they'd go together, and maybe someday soon act on that look in her eyes she sometimes gave Eroan when he wasn't watching. Fuck knows Lysander probably gave Eroan the same look often enough.

He watched the human warrior woman walk away while Eroan hung back. He'd no doubt follow her later. The humans would be fools to turn him away.

Eroan turned and Lysander pretended to be engrossed in watching the skies while keeping Eroan's approach over the rocks in the corner of his eye. Lysander shamelessly admired the sight he'd probably never see again after today. The elf moved like he knew his body was a weapon, and every inch of it could kill. He'd gone easy on Lysander yesterday, before things got... complicated. That had been his mistake. You could never go easy on a dragon. It'd turn around and eat you.

As the cloud cleared and sunlight poured into the creek again, that same light brightened Eroan's near-white hair, braided in one thick tail, a few locks curling free here and there. Blue, keen eyes, glittering with intelligence. Lysander was going to miss that sight.

"When do you leave for their camp?" He propped his head and watched Eroan pick up the dragonblade, admiring the hard line of his thigh, hip, and ass beneath his snug leathers.

"I don't." Eroan kicked over the campfire, smothering the flames.

He wasn't going? It couldn't be because the humans had said no. "You should go with her."

Eroan straightened, stared into the woods, then said simply, “Yes, I should.” And with that, he strode into the woods on the path they’d arrived on some days ago.

Lysander dropped off the rock and frowned at the retreating sight of the elf, the sword jostling against his back, braid swinging.

“Are you coming, prince?”

Lysander kept his pace steady. So Eroan wasn’t leaving him? It didn’t mean anything, just that Lysander was valuable in some way.

Eventually catching up with Eroan’s long-legged lope, he kept his voice level and asked, “Where are we going? To your people?” He laughed at the insane idea.

Predictably, Eroan didn’t answer, just swept on, soundlessly striding over the gnarled roots and weaving between trees.

“Where *are* we going?” Lysander asked, the silence killing him.

“You can get into the amethyst tower?” Eroan glanced behind him, brow raised. It wasn’t so much a question as a statement.

“Do you mean dead or alive, because my brother likely wouldn’t care either way.”

“There are tunnels, correct? The ones we found were always well-guarded. We weren’t able to penetrate them.” He stepped over the trunk of a fallen tree, utterly familiar with the terrain. “But you can.”

Lysander clambered over the mossy trunk, trying to unpack Eroan’s words. The tower was riddled with tunnels from the old times, when it had stood at the heart of a great human city. Those old foundations were still beneath the surface. Most were closed off, but some remained. He’d used them a few times while visiting the lowers for *relief*. Could he get inside now without being seen? “Perhaps.”

Eroan stopped, one boot propped on a tree root, and hesitated. When he looked over, intent flickered in his eyes. “Your brother is by now amethyst king, don’t you think?”

“He is,” Lysander confirmed, wondering where this conversation was now headed. “At least in name.” The amethyst brood would need more convincing for Akiem to stay king. There may even have been internal fights, other strong amethyst who believed they could take the rule from Akiem. Lysander knew of a few candidates from the flights he’d trained who were strong enough to tackle Akiem... but not win. Akiem was no pushover.

“How do you feel about that?” Eroan asked it like it was a simple question and required a simple answer but nothing inside the amethyst brood had been simple, and Lysander’s feelings about his brother were no exception.

“Why?” he asked.

“Do you care for him?”

His own laugh surprised him and startled a roosting murder of crows that took to the air, cawing. *Care?* “Did you not see how I lived?” The dry acidity in his tone was a surprise too, though it shouldn’t have been.

Eroan’s expression hadn’t changed. He merely waited for Lysander’s emotions to settle and jerked his chin, asking, “Are you loyal to the crown?”

“Loyal to the crown?” A growl bubbled through his words. “I am prince by blood but not in heart, that is all. And do I care for my brother?” He rubbed a hand over his chin. Why ask these questions now? What did he hope to achieve here? “I had a sister. A real sister from the same clutch of eggs, not just a brood sister where we’re all thrown together.” He leaned a shoulder against the nearest tree and peered up through its green-tipped branches. A squirrel bounded along a branch and out of sight. “If you don’t fight in amethyst to keep your head above the shit, you’ll drown in it. She fought but somehow kept her spirit.”

Eroan’s eyes softened. He shifted the sword, rolling his shoulders so it settled back into place. Lysander’s gaze fell to the curved blade—Amalia’s tooth—before skipping away. Telling Eroan why those swords had meant so much to him seemed pointless now. Besides, this proud, stubborn elf wore the sword well. It seemed right that he should have it. Amalia would have approved.

“Akiem loved her, I think. At least, as much as he’s capable of. They would play... He laughed more back then.” Lysander waved his own sentence off. Eroan didn’t want to know how Amalia and Akiem had spent the days and nights together. To him it likely seemed normal to have a sister to love. “Do you have kin, siblings, parents?”

Eroan’s quiet continued long enough that it seemed he wouldn’t answer. “No.”

Right, Eroan had told him before how Order assassins were unencumbered by loved ones so they could willfully throw themselves into killing.

“I *had* a family,” Eroan added. “I remember my mother’s laugh. A younger brother she carried in her arms... but our home was destroyed. I alone survived. My village, my people, they are my family now.”

The way he spoke, Lysander sensed this was information Eroan didn’t readily offer. He stashed it away like a precious gem. It wasn’t too much of a stretch to imagine what had destroyed a young Eroan’s family. Orphaned young, Eroan had survived, thrived among his own kind. Lysander envied elves and their fierce protective instincts. What must it feel like to be surrounded by people who cared for you, loved you?

“Mother got some idea in her head that Amalia was Akiem’s favorite,” Lysander continued. “She planned to breed Amalia off but Amalia wouldn’t submit. Elisandra crippled her—crushed her front leg—and exiled her. It was a death sentence. The same as my wing.” Lysander watched for Eroan’s flinch, but none came. Instead, he listened, attentive and undeterred. “I happened upon her carcass weeks later while patrolling. Her death, more than all the other shit we dealt with, broke Akiem.”

Eroan processed the information, his sharp mind likely turning it over and storing it for later use. He hadn’t forgotten this elf had made it his life’s purpose to kill dragons. Lysander had found himself telling Eroan too much before. He hadn’t cared about the consequences then and didn’t now. “You asked me if I care for my brother. It’s not as simple as that. Dragons don’t *care*. We think in stages of *how much can I use this creature for?* I don’t want to kill Akiem, but he *will* kill me. He must, if he wants the brood to respect him. It’s why he left the tower and came to the bronze line.”

“He searches for you,” Eroan said. “He tracked Seraph and I. Demanded to know where the humans held you...”

“You didn’t tell him?”

Eroan’s left eyebrow twitched higher. “I believed you were dead at the time.”

“Well, you did order me killed.”

And there was the wince and the little flicker in his cheek. A dead giveaway the elf was hurting. Lysander smiled at the sight of it. Eroan wasn’t as invincible as he made out. “Seraph is alive?” Eroan nodded and Lysander sighed his relief. “I like her. She has spirit—”

“Will you help me end this war?”

Lysander almost laughed. He coughed and clamped his teeth together. Had the elf lost his mind? “How are you going to go about that? There are a

thousand dragons in that tower. Countless others in nearby territories. Immeasurable wild ones in the north. Hundreds of thousands in lands like this one.”

“And I have their prince right here.”

Definitely lost his mind. “Besides the little problem of Akiem, I don’t have any authority over my kin. You saw what my life was like with Elisandra.”

Eroan wasn’t going to be so easily dissuaded. He had that same stony determination about him now that had gotten him through months of torture. “You led her flights in battle,” he said. “Your reputation as their most proficient fighter still holds.”

“That’s different.” Lysander pushed off the tree. “It was a different time. I was different...” Why wasn’t Eroan listening? Didn’t he remember how Elisandra had sold him off to the bronze as breeding stock. He wasn’t the same amethyst prince who had fought Eroan outside Elisandra’s door. Dokul had driven him into the ground like a fucking nail through a board. Whatever authority he’d had was long gone. And even to think of facing his kin now after *that*, it made him want to throw up the breakfast of berries and fish.

“It’s a chance,” Eroan persisted. “Which is more than we’ve got now. So will you help me?”

Lysander shook his head, more as a reflex than answer but Eroan wasn’t done.

“The dragon Carline said you’re the future. She told me to protect you. I thought she was mentally unsound, but your path continues to cross mine, again and again. Alumn has her reasons. I cannot afford to ignore the signs any longer.”

“*Alumn*, huh?” Lysander wished he had such faith in someone. “Carline told you I’m the future?” The old dragon had been spouting nonsense his entire life. Mumblings about potential and destiny. Frankly, he’d thought it all horseshit and she was just screwing with him because she had nothing better to do.

“Come back with me,” Eroan urged.

Lysander scratched at the niggling worry-spot in his chest. This was insanity. “Your people will kill me on sight. Your elf friend in the woods, you remember her? She would have killed me if Elisandra hadn’t... you know... eaten her.”

“I remember well enough, dragon.” He looked away. “If my people want me back, they’ll hear me out. I’m not saying it’ll be easy. It won’t. But they’re reasonable people.”

Where was this coming from suddenly? Weeks on the trek and now suddenly they were turning around? “What did Chloe say to you?”

And there, that flash of something was back in his eyes. Frustration, anger, Lysander couldn’t be sure. “The humans are scattered,” Eroan said. “Any ability to mobilize a resistance force is months away. I’m done waiting for others to decide when we die and what for. I have an opportunity right here...” He fixed his sharp gaze on Lysander. “You.”

Lysander held that look for as long as he dared without falling into those intense elf eyes then blinked away. “You want to use me to get your forces into the tower? That’s what you’re asking?”

“I’m asking for your help to stop your kin from sweeping elves and humans from this world. What you do with that is your choice.”

When he said it like that, he made it sound like some kind of destined choice, like they really could change the world, just the two of them. No wonder elves followed him. He could have told Lysander to roll over and close his eyes and he’d have considered it. The elf had a way about him that inspired others to act, made them want to follow his lead. “You’ll try to do this without me, won’t you? If you take a pride—or whatever your flights are called—into the tower, the guards will trap and kill you all. I know. I trained them to do exactly that.”

He didn’t reply, but something like admittance made him look away. And now Lysander could see why Eroan might have been kicked out of the infamous Order assassins. He’d do whatever it took to win. Any sacrifice, any cost. He’d go too far when everyone else was afraid to.

He chuckled to himself, pushed on down the track leaving Eroan behind him, and said, “Do you ever stop taunting death, Eroan Ilanea?”

“I’m an Assassin of the Order, death is my life,” came his reply from close behind.

Of course it was. “Your elf ass is going to get me killed.”

“Will you help?”

The thought of saying yes lifted his heavy heart. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d had a clear answer in his mind, the decision so right. “You expect me to drop everything from my obviously busy schedule to help you stop the war?”

“If you have something better to do, prince, by all means, go do that,” the elf’s smooth, taunting voice drawled, feeding a direct line to that feral part of Lysander’s brain that very much wanted to spend every hour he had left with someone who had spent their entire life honing skills to kill dragons just like him. That very same person had held him close at a time when he’d needed nothing else more.

“I’ll help you.” He said it and knew immediately it was right. Carline, wherever the old crone was, would be cackling hard at the amethyst prince about to follow an elf’s insane plan to end a never-ending war. “I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do.” *Or anyone I’d rather be with.* He was fairly certain this decision would get him killed but there was nothing and no one else he’d gladly die for.

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CHAPTER 19



Eroan

BREAKERS THUNDERED against jutting coastal rocks. Over the expanse of angry looking water, Eroan's homeland interrupted the horizon. He'd crossed the expanse of water a few times now, but by boat. There were no boats here. Some debris, perhaps enough to make a raft, but that would take too long.

"Can you fly, elf?" Lysander smirked, apparently amused by the stretch of water blocking their path.

"Can you?"

Lysander chuckled and the soft, rolling sound set off a small cascade of flutters low in Eroan's belly, the kind of fluttering that led to wandering distractions and forbidden thoughts.

A raft it was then. But not tonight. The sky bled red. There were only a few hours of daylight left and the time was better spent making a camp.

"You know..." Lysander scratched at his nose and gave Eroan the kind of wicked look that told he wouldn't appreciate the next words. "I can swim it."

And die. "It's miles," Eroan dismissed. "Swimming it nearly killed me."

Lysander rolled his eyes. "Obviously, not as man..."

Oh. Dragons were likely buoyant and given what he'd seen of Lysander's dragon-physique he had the strength. "And how am I supposed

to cross it?”

“You want me to spell it out for you?” Lysander crouched and picked up a pebble. He tossed it into the churning surf. “I’m guessing it’ll take a few hours under the cover of darkness. If you ride up high, behind my crown, you’ll be protected from the surf. I’ll try to—”

“I’ll make a raft.” It would be easier than... what Lysander suggested. A few boards, some unraveled fishing net. Everything he needed was right here. He began looking for debris among the rocks and ignored his pounding heart.

“Afraid to get up close and personal with a dragon without sticking your sword in it?”

The words pulled Eroan up short. He turned to find Lysander casually tossing more pebbles into the bubbling surf. “With good reason.”

Lysander threw him a low-lidded glance, the kind that invited further games to be played. “I don’t bite. Often.” He straightened and brushed sand from his hands. “Had I wanted to eat you...” his mouth fought with a smile, “I’d have done so at the nest when I wasn’t in my right mind. You did look delicious at the time.”

Afraid? Eroan adjusted the sword at his back. It wasn’t a fear, more a healthy desire to stay alive coupled with the curiously playful look in Lysander’s eyes that had Eroan wondering if he was about to regret agreeing to this.

“You can swim that distance?” The opposite coastline was a long way off and the water foreboding.

“Are you doubting my word?”

No, my own sanity. “And I’m supposed to just... climb on?”

“You’re making this more difficult than it needs to be.” Lysander’s smile was the kind that teased. “We’re wasting time. Say the word and I’ll shift.”

Lysander wasn’t some small kit. Since the bronze nest, Eroan had dreamed of standing in front of Lysander as dragon, his hand spread over the dragon’s nose and the shock on Lysander’s dragon-face. “You’re comfortable doing this?” The touch had startled Lysander out of whatever killing madness had gripped him then. What if he went wild halfway across the channel? What if he decided he no longer liked an elf clinging to the back of his head?

“Just so long as you don’t take that sword and stick it in my skull, yes. If you want to trust me, you must trust all of me. I am dragon, that’s never going to change. Do I have your word you won’t stab me, elf?”

Behind the crown was the most vulnerable spot on the dragon. One Eroan had exploited countless times. He’d taught dozens of elves the same. And now he was about to clamber on a dragon and allow it to ferry him across a huge body of water for a few hours. In the dark. With no boat or buoyancy aid.

If Lysander did turn on him, he was in the most advantageous location to make sure he didn’t turn vicious. Eroan recalled a tale, of sorts, from when he was young. A fox and a scorpion wanted to cross a river. The scorpion stings the fox halfway across and they both die. Eroan had told Curan that the story was a terrible one. Now it made a whole lot of sense. But he wasn’t sure which beast Lysander was. The scorpion, who dooms them both because it’s in his nature to kill, or the fox who trusted a killer. Maybe they were both scorpions. In which case, this would not end well. It all came down to one thing: trust. If he was going to trust Lysander with helping his people, then he would have to trust all of him, not just the man, but the dragon too. This crossing was the perfect time to test that trust.

“All right. I won’t stab you so long as you don’t try to kill me,” Eroan agreed. “Shift then, dragon, and let’s get this done.”

He wasn’t prepared for the blast of power. No human or elf could be. The light, the sudden pressure against his ears, the crackle of energy lifting the hairs on his neck and arms, and the shiver that tracked down his spine. *Magic*, it was called, but never fully explained. It just was, like the warmth of the sun that fed Eroan’s soul, or the shifting of the seasons. And then, of course, the sight of the beast towered over him. Lysander’s scales looked almost black in the fading light, but his eyes took the low light and refracted it, making them glow green.

Eroan resisted the urge to grab for his sword. *Just a dragon*. He’d seen plenty of them. The queen had carried him in her clutches. He’d killed dozens. This one was Lysander, the prince who’d protected him, even if he did now look like every elf’s nightmare.

Lysander slowly brought his head down, planting his whiskered chin softly on the pebbles and huffed through his nose, signaling he was ready.

Eroan had climbed hills smaller than this. The crown Eroan was supposed to cling to was a ridge of spiked bone that flared up, presenting a

fearsome appearance. Lysander's was one of the most impressive he'd seen. The spot behind, as well as being the most vulnerable spot, was also the most protected, at least from the front and sides.

Lysander huffed again and shuffled his belly lower in the sand, trying to make himself smaller. Eroan appreciated the effort but the thought of climbing a dragon wasn't getting any less daunting.

He walked the length of Lysander's snout, passed the enormous shining green eye with its wide, dark pupil tracking his every move, and stopped behind the curve of his jaw. The ridge of bone followed the angle of the jaw upward, its spikes getting progressively larger the higher they climbed.

It was just a few hours. How bad could it be?

He touched a scale twice the size of his hand. Warmth soaked into his palm. He pressed his other hand in and deliberately ran his touch over the scaled surface, riding the bumps and smooth, polished sections.

A deep rumbling started up somewhere inside Lysander's bulk. Not a growl, but a softer sound. A purr? A small smile tugged on Eroan's mouth. Lysander liked to be touched and he had to admit, the lattice of scales were fascinating up close, and the *thud-thud* of a dragon's enormous heart beat like an elven drum.

Lysander grumbled a reminder to hurry.

Eroan caught the lowest spike and heaved himself—one crown-spike at a time—up the dragon's head to straddle his broad neck. When Lysander lifted, Eroan's gut sank, the swift movement and sudden height reminding him that elves were not meant to ride dragons. He clutched on, pressed himself to the smaller scales behind the crown, and listened to the crash of waves and the beast's enormous thudding heart as Lysander took to the water. Salt water spray cooled his face and hands, numbing his grip. He clutched tighter, tucking himself in behind the ridge of bone. If he survived this, Seraph would never believe him.



THE CHANNEL CROSSING was relatively painless besides a few rogue waves that had nearly tipped him off and Lysander's huffing and shifting to keep him balanced. Lysander had been the model of good behavior. No stabbing required. But scaling the cliffs below the abandoned bronze wall had been

an entirely different challenge. Weakened from the endless traveling, scaling the cliff left Eroan's body aching and Lysander—now back as man—visibly shivering.

Dragoncalls peppered the night, keeping them moving, until the warm dawnlight filtered through green-leafed trees and the calls had thinned to just one or two distant barks. Lysander still trembled, despite the day already warming. He watched the skies through the waving leaves.

To his shame, it took Eroan too long to understand why Lysander had fallen quiet. It had nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with the dragons in the skies. This was bronze territory. Some had likely remained, or perhaps they'd returned since Eroan had taken Lysander from their nest. Either way, Lysander wasn't cold, he was terrified.

A hollow opened ahead where a huge oak had fallen, ripping up the ground. Eroan recognized it as the temporary camp he and Seraph had used before winter set in. The circle of rocks marking the campfire was still in place and right there, Eroan starkly recalled how he'd sobbed in Seraph's arms on hearing his home was gone and how he'd ordered the death of the dragon who now shivered beside him. "We rest up here."

"Why waste good daylight?" Lysander mumbled, but he didn't look up. He'd seen the cold ring of stones and looked at it as though seeing more. His hair had escaped its knot again and fallen forward. Eroan fought the urge to tuck those locks back, to tell him he was safe here, that he'd meant his vow to protect him.

"We can afford to rest a while," he said instead.

The fact Lysander didn't argue and slumped down in the divot, against the bank, validated Eroan's concerns.

Lysander stretched out a leg and dropped his head back, but kept his arms wrapped around himself. His eyes closed.

The arduous last few weeks showed on the lines around Lysander's mouth and the permanent knot in his brow, but beneath the dirt and frown, the prince was still there. Somewhere. His mouth wasn't as quick to smile as it had been, but the smiles that did shine through were real, unlike the ones he'd thrown Eroan's way in the tower. His eyes too, when open, held a brittleness to them that hadn't been there before, as though he were walking the fine edge of a blade. Eroan had seen the evidence of that when Lysander had pinned him against a rock. It would take time for him to heal, and it would not be easy. Xena's words reminded him of a time when he'd

suffered. She'd seen him volatile and wracked with guilt even if Eroan hadn't seen the signs himself, but he saw them in Lysander now.

Lysander's lips parted. His breaths deepened, as though sleeping. Eroan's gaze tracked over that smart mouth, remembering again how Lysander's tongue and lips had woken Eroan's darkest desires in the worst of times.

A short, sharp dart of lust cut off those thoughts. "I'll find us some food," he said, unsure if Lysander was awake to hear.

There would be no room for lustful thoughts once he was home. Elves did not want the things Eroan wanted. They were not aroused by being held down and threatened by a dragon. As for the rest of Eroan's thoughts... Maybe it was Elisandra's doing, some power of hers leftover from his time in the tower? It had to be. There was no other explanation, other than the one he couldn't afford entertain, that he might feel more for Lysander than he had any elf.

Hunger knotted his belly. He freed the blade and went in search of prey.

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CHAPTER 20



Lysander

THE SUN WAS WARM, the forest quiet, the breeze full of springtime scents, and with no further dragoncalls, Lysander's shivers subsided. He'd waved off Eroan's concerned glances, telling him it was the strain of the crossing, but the shivering hadn't started until he'd seen the dragons in the sky.

He hadn't feared them before. Not even after the coupling or Mirann's mind-fucks. But now... Terror clutched at his heart and drenched him in cold sweat. Nobody *wanted* to be afraid, to feel their body betray them, and Lysander had always hidden it, controlled it, used it. Any sign of fear would have killed him long before now if he'd allowed it. But that was before the cage, before Dokul. He could still taste the bastard at the back of his throat, and if he let the memories claw at him, the bronze *beast* was inside him all over again.

He swallowed. His gut rolled and his mouth watered. The shivering started up again. Would it ever fucking end?

Maybe Eroan's people would be kinder? They couldn't be any worse. He was under no illusions. They weren't going to welcome him in with open arms. In fact, Eroan's optimism seemed too short-sighted. Maybe elves were inherently hopeful, but Lysander had been around long enough to have hope beaten out of him. The fact remained Lysander had killed elves. Many of them. And those he hadn't killed, he'd left for Elisandra to

toy with. Killing assassins, protecting the queen, rallying the flights, those were the things he'd excelled at. Either Eroan had forgotten or he was kidding himself.

A musky scent tickled his nose. He opened his eyes and sniffed at the air, parting his lips to draw the taste across his tongue.

Wolf.

Jolting to his feet, he plunged into the brush after Eroan.

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CHAPTER 21



E_{roan}

THE ROE DEER had its head down, delicately munching the soft grass and mosses between the trees. There was enough meat on it to fill both Eroan's and Lysander's belly for the long trek back to Cheen. The logistics of cooking it would be interesting, but he'd deal with that problem after he'd slain it.

Crouched low, hood up, he waited for the deer to wander closer. Its ears flicked and a dainty hoof sank in the moss, inching forward one leisurely step at a time. Occasionally it lifted its head and looked about, its poor vision skimming right over Eroan's motionless form.

He'd approached downwind, preventing his scent—a mix of elf, sea salt, sweat, and dirt—from giving him away. Janna would have caught it and butchered it by now, but then Eroan had never had the patience for a long stalk.

The deer started, jerking its head up. A distant buck honked, and the roe bolted away through the bushes like an arrow. Eroan dropped his head. No venison for dinner.

A rumbling growl sounded a second before a huge weight slammed into his back. He hit the ground cheek first. Grit dug in, shearing off a layer of skin. He pushed up. Teeth clamped around the back of his neck. Reaching behind him, he sunk his fingers into rough fur. The wolf shook, trying to

rattle the life out of him, but the coat in its jaws loosened and he twisted himself free and backward. The huge wolf mauled his coat, ripping strips from beneath its paws.

A new pair of yellow eyes loomed from the dark behind its pack-mate. This one had its head down, stalking in low. One wolf he could tackle, but not two.

His sword glinted in the dirt between him and them. The first attack had torn it free of his back. He could choose to go for the sword and fight or run for a tree and hope he made it before the wolves snapped at his heels.

The first wolf was done with its prey of coat and swung its attention back to Eroan.

A rustle of movement from behind pricked Eroan's ears. Three wolves. And now he had no choice at all. He lunged forward, grabbed at the sword, looked up to see the wolf galloping in, and thrust the blade forward, striking the beast in the belly. The animal let out a whimpering cry, curling around the sword, snapping its teeth at the blade.

He yanked the sword free and whirled away, straight into the sights of another. Then a different rumbling growl poured in, deeper than a wolf's burble and full of threat. The wolf eyeing Eroan dropped low on its haunches, plastered its ears flat against its head, the white of its eyes showing as it turned.

Eroan followed its gaze.

Lysander emerged through the undergrowth, eyes fierce. The dragon growls rumbled on, not from the man he appeared to be, but from the truth of him, far bigger than the wolves and the clearing.

The wolves whimpered away under the weight of Lysander's presence, leaving their pack-mate bleeding out.

Eroan rubbed the back of his bruised neck and stumbled to his feet. The skin wasn't broken, he'd been lucky his now-ruined coat had taken the worst of the bite. Lysander was looking at that coat now and the dead wolf beside it, hands clenched and trembling at his sides.

"Thank you."

Lysander twitched, waking from whatever thoughts had him gripped. His cold, flat look had Eroan wondering if the threat hadn't left, it had just gotten bigger. Then Lysander came closer, crossing the small clearing in a few strides, setting Eroan's heart racing. He eased back a step. Then

another. A dribble of blood tickled his cheek. He swiped it away with the back of his hand.

Lysander tracked the movement, then the male's hand hooked around the back of Eroan's bruised neck and suddenly, breathlessly, Lysander's hot mouth was on Eroan's, his tongue thrusting in, taking what hadn't been given.

A fire burst alive inside his chest, one raging with lust and fear, with a sudden, terrifying need so visceral that Eroan's lifetime of training kicked in. He brought his hands up between them and shoved hard, pushing Lysander back.

Staggering, Eroan tasted dragon on his tongue, like he had before, when dragon was all he'd been able to taste and see and smell. Disgust stoked the fire inside now, but that wasn't all. His body stirred in other ways, responding to Lysander like fire licks at fuel.

Lysander's glare blazed with his own raging flames. This wasn't the weakened prince, nor was it the smart-mouthed joker who made light of his terrible life.

He lunged in again, catching Eroan by the neck and yanking him forward. Eroan's chest slammed against Lysander's, the dragon full of rough demand. Eroan growled, pulling his head away. Lysander twisted and Eroan's shove slipped off. He didn't—couldn't—want this.

Lysander's fingers squeezed at Eroan's throat. Eroan's back hit the hard, rough tree bark, stopping his retreat, and suddenly Lysander pressed in and all over, just like before, only there was no sword between them now, just Lysander's fingers clamped around Eroan's neck, his leg between Eroan's, his chest an impenetrable wall.

Lysander's rough jaw scratched Eroan's grazed cheek, his lips brushing Eroan's ear. "If you want to stop me, use the sword in your other hand." The words hissed and Eroan's mind skipped over the thought of stopping this to the dark thought of needing more. "You hate me, right? I'm a tool to you. A way to get back at everything my kin did to you. We killed your family, we tortured you. Then fucking use me, Eroan." He dropped his hand and thrust it against Eroan's groin. "*This* says you want to."

The ball of Lysander's thumb pushed in, grinding against Eroan's painfully swollen arousal. His fingers plunged lower, seating near Eroan's balls, and rabid lust surged through Eroan's entire body, funneling right to where Lysander's hands had him gripped, by the neck and cock.

Lysander's lips brushed the corner of Eroan's mouth and Eroan found himself turning toward that teasing question, needing its answer. Wherever Lysander's rage had come from, whatever had caused it, Eroan recognized the need behind it all. He'd felt the same often enough. The need to rage at the world, to fight because the alternative would be to fall in the dirt and let the world rage at you.

Lysander nipped at his lip and Eroan tried to seal the kiss, only for Lysander's to hold him back. Lysander's mouth teased. He flicked out his tongue, tasting. The soft, intimate wetness had Eroan's arousal pulsing, his denials leaving him as his hips canted, driving his erection harder against Lysander's stubbornly motionless hand.

Lysander's hot breaths warmed Eroan's neck where blood pulsed close to the surface of his skin. As wrong as this was, Eroan's entire body ached to be touched and owned by this male, like it had in the queen's tower. Never had he wanted someone to control him like this. A sudden madness had smothered him, robbed him of reasonable thought. He'd always been the one in control. Always. But here, Lysander had him trapped, turning what should have been fear into a ferocious longing. "If you're going to fuck me, dragon, do it," he snapped, flashing sharp teeth.

Lysander's grip left Eroan's neck, then his hand caught Eroan's fingers and guided them to the hard rod trapped inside Lysander's trousers. Eroan molded his fingers around the erection as much as the fabric would allow. The dragon's eyes flared, more fuel on the fire. Lysander's low, bubbling growls shivered through Eroan, igniting the lust he'd worked so hard to deny.

Eroan was falling ever faster toward the insanity. He yanked his hand free, grabbed Lysander's rough jaw and attacked his mouth with a kiss so barbed it hurt. His sharp teeth cut, and Lysander took it, giving back the same assault.

Eroan wanted to strip this male bare and taste every forbidden inch of him. He wanted it now, all of him, everything. He tore at Lysander's coat, needing to feel warm, smooth skin, when Lysander suddenly caught both his hands, lifted them over Eroan's head and pinned his wrists to the tree.

Trapped, Eroan groaned out his frustration at being denied, then Lysander's tongue swirled at his neck, making him forget how he wanted to touch and allowed him to just feel.

Lysander's free hand rubbed at Eroan's erection, but none of it was enough to quench the heat between them. "Harder," Eroan demanded, capturing the dragon's gaze with his own. "Take me. Now."

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CHAPTER 22



Lysander

RAMPANT DESIRE LED Lysander's thoughts to the edge of a precipice and when Eroan looked him in the eyes, fierce demands falling from the elf's snarling mouth, it was all he could do not to turn him around and mindlessly fuck him against the tree. The elf was a heated, writhing, vision of temptation. His mouth wicked, the fire in his eyes like some personal torment designed just for Lysander. To have Eroan would be to capture a wild force, one Lysander would do anything for. The primal part of him wanted to fill him and fuck him until the world fell away, but he was afraid of how far he'd go, afraid he'd hurt him, or worse.

"Alumn damn you, dragon!" Eroan arched, giving himself to Lysander's hand.

His words had a direct link to Lysander's cock and every damn thing he said had him twitching and leaking, needing to be sated. So much anger flared in the elf's eyes and danced along the cruel twist of his lips, Lysander wanted to lick that anger off his trembling, sculpted body.

He hadn't planned on this, but the wolves, the fear that he'd been too late, and realizing one day Eroan wouldn't survive, had clicked over that switch inside that told him to fuck the rules, the fear, the wrongs and the rights. And then Eroan had fought him, shoved and pushed, denying the

truth that was alive and hungry between them, making Lysander lose his mind.

Even now, trapped beneath him, Eroan was a stubborn riddle of denials. He'd fight until his last moment, but his body didn't lie. The male's straining cock grinding against Lysander's palm didn't lie. He wanted this, to be taken, to be owned. Eroan *liked* it.

Lysander had seen that flicker of fire when Eroan had been tied to Elisandra's bed. Oh, but that fire raged now. Uncontrolled and free and oh-so-fucking-hungry.

A dragon's roar thundered above. Birds startled. And all the lust, the need, the delight, fell off Lysander, making way for a sudden, bone-chilling fear.

The shock of hearing the call and what it did to him, stunned him into numbness. He let Eroan's wrists go and stumbled back, lust replaced by sudden, sickening cold. The shift almost poured through him, right there, like some weak lower unable to control himself.

Eroan said something, but suddenly all Lysander could hear was Dokul's rumbling laughter alongside the seductive song of his mother's voice.

The dragon in the skies let loose another roar, getting closer, and Lysander dropped to his knees, needing to get low, to submit. It wasn't Dokul. He knew that. The cry was bronze but not the chief's, but the fear didn't care. It had him now.

Eroan's fingers curled around Lysander's bicep. The smell of elf soothed his rattled mind, guiding him out of the fog. He blinked up at Eroan, at the pity in his eyes, and felt shame slither beneath his skin.

"Can you move?" Eroan whispered.

The bronze was close. Wing beats thumped above. The bronze had found them, those beats said. Dokul would be close behind. Eroan would die and it would be Lysander's fault.

"Lysander..." Eroan's mouth brushed his ear, the soft way he said his name brought him back from the loud place in his head. "Come with me," Eroan whispered. The elf's warm hand brushed against Lysander's neck and his lips teased against his cheek. "I'm not leaving without you."

CHAPTER 23



Eroan

LYSANDER HAD WITHDRAWN after the incident with the wolves and after, when the bronze had almost found them. And as Eroan stood before the Cheen's elders, he was no longer sure this was the right thing to do. Lysander was safely tucked away far from Cheen and waiting for him to return, but bringing him here after everything he'd been through could be too much too soon.

"It is good to see you have returned, Eroan," Anye greeted. He nodded politely. The last to arrive, she took her seat at the head of the table. "What is so urgent it could not wait for you to get settled before calling this meeting?"

He'd arrived less than an hour ago and come straight to the elders, avoiding Curan's demands to be briefed first. The Order leader sat off to the right now, among dozens of his prides. No Nye or Seraph. They were likely on patrol.

"I bring news from the humans and an opportunity."

He quickly told them of how the bronze had devastated the human ranks, but said they would recover in time, then they waited for him to present to them the real reason for him marching in after two months away.

"I have Lysander Amethyst in my care."

Gasps sailed about the hall. They all knew the name. Lysander Amethyst had caused the death of their loved ones. The queen's younger son had a reputation. Although a warped one, twisted as it passed from elf to elf. Eroan let them chatter and grumble, reminding himself of how the first time Eroan had seen Lysander, he'd have given anything to drive a blade through his heart. He couldn't forget his people would feel the same way.

"Quiet!" Anye called, settling those in the hall before fixing her stare on Eroan. "In your care? Would you please explain, Eroan?"

"I know you will find this difficult to believe..." He told them all he dared. Some Curan knew—too much, in truth—but the Order leader stayed quiet. Eroan told them of how Lysander had helped him escape the tower and kept him alive several times before that moment.

"He's not like the others." Seraph's voice rang from the back of the room. Eroan hadn't seen her enter but found her among the rowing crowd now and nodded his thanks. She dipped her chin in return. "He kept me safe from the bronze," she added. "He's the reason I'm here today."

"It seems this dragon has a penchant for saving elves," Anye remarked, but not in humor. "As convincing as this all is, the fact remains he is an amethyst prince. His motives are likely unkind ones."

If only she had seen Lysander save Eroan from the bronzes' sexual appetites, or the countless other times he'd helped in some way. Chloe had come around but only after it was too late.

Eroan began to fear being told Lysander was good was not enough, but it was all Eroan had to give them. That, and the truth. "I did not kill the dragon queen, though I was there." The crowd was twittering again. He sighed, the truth finally free. "Lysander broke her neck."

The twitter turned into a riot of noise that took too long for the elders to control again.

"And what is it you're suggesting, Eroan?" Anye finally addressed him.

"He has no love for his own kin. He'll help us fight them." The crowd exploded, but not in joy. Fear. Eroan had brought a dragon to them, one strong enough to kill their queen. This wasn't working.

Eroan caught Curan's keen glance before leaving the elves to their riotous outburst. It wasn't often his people got swept up in fear, but a dragon challenging everything they thought they knew was enough.

Eroan loitered by a water pump, idly watching elflings splash about under the sun. When they saw him, they cowered. He'd forgotten he was caked in dust from his trek.

Their big eyes watched him approach the water pump. He crouched, pumped out some water and splashed it over his face and down his neck, then flicked the rest over them, sending the little group into fits of giggles.

"More!" they squealed. "More, more!"

He pumped out more water into both hands and tossed it over them, stamping and dancing in the mud. They were young, just a few years old. At their age, he imagined he must have been like them, believing nothing could hurt them. Until one day everything had changed. He hoped these little ones never had to suffer like he had.

"When I heard there was a riot in the hall," Janna said, startling him from the game. "I should have known you'd be in the middle of it."

He stood. "Janna, you look... well."

Her green-tinted hair had darkened, and her belly rounded, leaving no doubt she was in the family way. She still wore the bow slung over her shoulder. Being with-child wouldn't stop her hunting.

"I'd hug you, but you stink and this," she fondly patted her belly, "gets in the way."

He cupped her face and lightly kissed her forehead before quickly withdrawing. "Congratulations." Color touched her cheeks. He should have said it months ago, should have said a lot of things. "A summer babe?"

"She will be." She blinked up at him and the same fondness warmed him at the sight of seeing her safe. Brushing her hair back, he took the opportunity to gently flick her ear. She swatted him away with a laugh, one that brought a smile to his lips, until he spotted Ross casually pretending not to watch them from his sentinel position by the gate. The look on the male's face was more assassin-worthy than fisher-folk.

"She kicks," Janna said. "She's strong. Definitely female."

"I'm happy for you." Eroan gave Janna a few feet of space, lest Ross decide to put some weight behind his glare.

"So, what trouble have you gotten into now?"

"The usual..." he hedged, but as her smile faded, he guessed she'd already heard all she needed to.

"Is the dragon nearby?" she asked.

He didn't answer. Janna wasn't an assassin, but she could have been. And although he'd told her about the prince who had helped him, she didn't know it all. Every elf here would want Lysander dead. Worry niggled at him again. He'd been thinking of the future when he'd asked Lysander to help, but in doing so, he'd forgotten to consider Lysander's part in all of this. The risk to him was great, maybe too great.

"He's not bad, Janna. He saved Seraph for no other reason than because it was the right thing to do."

She searched his face and nodded. "I believe you but there are others who... They worry you've been alone too long..."

"I wouldn't bring him here if I didn't believe he would protect us."

"I know." She dropped her gaze and worried her lip between her teeth.

Eroan spotted Ross making his way over. "How I left things between us," he said hastily. "It was wrong of me." In truth, he hadn't intended on returning from France at all, and their time together that night before his leaving, it had been more of a parting gift to her.

She looked up, her soft smile genuine. "I've always known who you are, Eroan Ilanea, and would never dream of changing you. Now stop worrying over me and go upset the elders some more. They haven't had this much excitement in years."

When he was summoned back to the hall, only Anye and Curan remained.

Eroan told them of his plan to use Lysander's knowledge to get deeper than ever inside the tower and strike from within, ideally hitting at its heart: Akiem. When done, Anye's face had grown severe and a vein pulsed in Curan's neck.

"He is not like the others," Eroan added softly, hoping to give them the nudge they needed.

"You want us to risk our entire prides on the word of a dragon?" Curan asked, worryingly calm.

"Yes."

"You go too far, Eroan." His voice trembled. Color flushed around the scar on his cheek.

"That may be so, but if we can bring down the tower, and continue to employ the ballista, these southern lands will belong to elves once more. Isn't that worth the risk?"

Anye placed her hands together on the tabletop and glanced at her Order leader. Curan gave his head a firm shake. She sighed. "Eroan, please excuse us. We'll let you know the decision shortly."

"Know that if you do not admit him, under my care, then I'll not be returning to the Order."

Anye failed at hiding her shock, but it was Curan who spoke, "Perhaps *that* is for the best."

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CHAPTER 24



Lysander

EROAN RETURNED in darkness with a length of rope and a hessian bag. The last time he'd had a bag over his head he'd almost been executed. "Really?"

"It's not my choice." At least Eroan looked apologetic.

Lysander offered his wrists. "You know I can break that rope in a blink." He could think of a far better use for the rope and imagined looping it around Eroan's wrists while he lay beneath him, all stretched out, naked and wanting. Only along with that thought came the memory of pinning Eroan to a tree, and how he'd spectacularly lost his mental-shit right after.

Eroan looped the rope ends around his wrists. Lysander took the time to study Eroan's face. The pinched eyebrows and distant gaze weren't inspiring. Lysander's gut clenched. "On a scale of one to ten, how much do your people want to kill me? Ten being they'd like to gut me and hang my carcass from their biggest tree and one being we'll all sit around the campfire drinking hot milk."

Eroan took too long to think about it. He cinched the ropes tight. His light eyelashes flicked up, framing blue eyes. "Eight."

"Oh, eight. Lovely. And I suppose those who don't want me dead are you and Seraph?"

"Something like that."

Eroan parted the bag and lifted it onto Lysander's head, drawing him in close.

"Wait..." Lysander's heart skipped. Eroan hesitated, the bag still raised. Lysander worried his lower lip in between his teeth. Eroan's eyes, speckled with silver in the low light, tracked the movement. "The last time I had a bag over my head you said—"

Eroan's mouth was on his suddenly, the kiss slow and leisurely, like a long, lazy summer day and Lysander immediately forgot the question, forgot it all, and reveled in the sweetness of elf and the tease of the male's tongue. His hands were tied, else he'd have them exploring by now. Since the *incident* a few days ago, where Eroan had clearly wanted Lysander, he'd kept his distance. But now, this teasing little kiss reignited Lysander's galloping feelings all over again, and the relief that Eroan *did* want him. Then the bag came down with a rapid shunt and all he could see was filtered darkness. "By the Great Ones, elf, you are a vicious tease."

"Shut up and walk, dragon." Humor lifted his order.

Lysander's battered heart swelled.

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CHAPTER 25



Eroan

EROAN LED Lysander by his roped wrists through the lines of gathered elves. They parted ahead of him and closed in behind, too afraid to get close, but too curious not to see the dragon prince. A few whispers hissed between them, but their words were lost against the sound of flickering torches. Most were silent, which felt worse.

Eroan was to take Lysander to the food-store and tie him up inside, as agreed with the elders. With every step, he prayed to Alumn that his people would be understanding, that they would not judge this lost prince for his name alone but by his selfless deeds. But so many he passed had vengeance in their eyes. And his assassin brothers and sisters, watching on from the shadows, would be the hardest of all to convince.

Once inside the store, Eroan tied just one of Lysander's wrists to a structural floor-to-ceiling beam and pulled off the bag.

Lysander wet his lips and ran his glassy gaze over Eroan, darting it to the assassins behind him. The prince's jaw hardened and Eroan imagined what he saw on the elves' faces was the same lust for vengeance Eroan had recognized on the walk in.

Lysander pulled on the rope and looked questioningly back at Eroan. "I trust you."

Eroan swallowed. He had made costly mistakes before and prayed this would not be another. “This is temporary.”

Lysander’s attention wandered to the neat pile of fresh clothes, bucket of clean water and another bucket for Lysander to relieve himself in. The food-store wasn’t a windowless tower dungeon and the single rope wasn’t a pair of wrist shackles, and yet the sickening wrongness Eroan had felt on the walk in came down hard on him now. *Just temporary.*

Turning, he caught the eye of the two guards and nodded. He knew them well, as he knew most of Cheen’s Order. They were more than capable of dispatching one restrained dragon before he could shift. A flung dagger to the throat would do it. “He is a guest and should be treated well. This is a formality.”

They nodded, eyes forward, faces blank.

Eroan had to convince his people of Lysander’s loyalty, and fast. Lysander’s life depended on it.

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CHAPTER 26



Lysander

EROAN LEFT the food-store without looking back. He did trust Eroan... to be exactly who he was: an Order assassin who needed him to strike at the dragonkin.

Lysander took up the washcloth and water and cleaned the dirt from his face and neck, as much as he could without stripping naked. The two silent elves watched on. One female, one male. Like stone statues against the far wall, dragon-teeth daggers at their hips and ankles. Their reception was decidedly icy, though he supposed he couldn't blame them.

They were the ones taking the risk here. He could shift and destroy half their village before they got a lucky strike in with one of their shiny new dragon-teeth swords. The bag over his head had been a waste of time too. He could smell the ocean, the forest too. It wouldn't take him long to orientate himself if he could get his head above the trees. Besides all that, he couldn't stay awake night and day and he would be vulnerable at times. Eroan might not want him dead, but from the looks of these two guards, the rest of the elves certainly did.

Different guards switched in through the night. Lysander dozed, his back against the beam, half-alert to the two new dragon-killers watching over him. Sometime near dawn, the door rattled and a familiar elf strode in, a wide grin on her perky face.

He blinked away the weariness and got to his feet, working the restraining rope up the beam.

Seraph shifted from foot-to-foot, glancing between Lysander and the guards.

“Hey,” he croaked, letting a warm smile slip through. She looked decidedly better since he’d carried her unconscious body away from Dokul.

She sprang, and Lysander readied for a dagger in the gut or across his throat. She crashed into him, flung her arms around his neck and dragged him down, into a full-body hug.

“Huh, we’re hugging...? All right.” His muscles unlocked and carefully he looped his free arm around her back, pulling her close. Gods, she was a little thing.

The guards’ collective gazes burned. Lysander displayed a middle-finger and the male to the right silently bared his teeth.

Seraph hugged him closer. “You’re alive...”

So little, but full of fire. She smelled like the forest, like Eroan, and for a few moments he allowed himself the warmth of just being held by another with no ulterior motive, just kindness. “No biting this time?” he grumbled with a chuckle.

She plucked herself free, realigning her clothes to settle her composure. Her eyes were like Eroan’s, pupils full, her lashes dark and sweeping. Her face still had a little roundness to it that she’d soon grow into. “I thought... I thought you were dead.” She sniffed and blinked at the ceiling, chasing off unshed tears.

“That seems to be an ongoing theme with elves. They either think I’m dead or want me dead.”

She glanced behind her at the stoic guards.

“They don’t say much,” he added.

Awkwardly smiling, some of her elven hardness returned, the guards having reminded her of her position and responsibilities. “Your hair got longer.”

“So did yours.” He backed against the pole, easing the pull of the rope on his wrists.

“I’m growing it out to annoy Curan.” She combed her fingers through her mass of dark locks. “Our Order leader... he says I’m too much like Eroan.”

Lysander could see that. “Maybe if more elves were like Eroan the war would have ended before it began.” His casual words landed hard and her smile fell away.

“I’m sorry... about all this.” She gestured at the bucket and clothes. “They’re afraid. I told them they didn’t need to be.”

“It’s all right. It’s warm, it’s dry. This is luxury compared to my last lodgings.”

She stepped closer, clearly wanting to move in again. “If I’d known you were taken sooner, I would have found you myself. Eroan stopped me...” Tugging at her sleeve, she frowned down at her feet.

“He did, huh.” He tried not to read too much into that. Eroan had likely been trying to protect Seraph. And what could she have done? The bronze would have killed her on sight, or worse. Eroan had been right to stop her. But Eroan could have come sooner? Could have but hadn’t. His place was with his people. It was a miracle he’d come at all.

“He says you can help us. Will you?”

Lysander dropped his head back against the beam and sighed, suddenly so tired with it all. More cages. More questions. He was here by choice. It felt like that should be enough, but he understood why it wasn’t. “If you’ll let me.”

“I’ve heard him in the hall, speaking with the elders.” She lowered her voice. “He’s trying to make it so you don’t have to be tied up but Curan is... He... er...” She glanced behind her again. “Eroan told him some things from before and he thinks you’re... you know...” She made some interesting clasping motions with her hands. “... *involved*.”

By her odd tone, he assumed *some things from before* were probably bad things from Eroan’s time at the tower. This *Curan* would be the one to convince if Lysander had any hope of staying alive here.

“He’ll talk them around. Anye likes him, like Xena used to. He’ll make it so you don’t have to be tied up much longer.”

She sounded confident, but she also clearly worshipped the ground Eroan walked. It was all on her face, every bit of admiration, every fearful piece of concern. Her honesty was a refreshing change to the lies and deceit he’d matured among. Her being here made all the difference in the world. “It’s good to see you again, Seraph.”

“You too, dragon. And thank you... for everything you did.”

Funny how a simple heartfelt thanks could chew him up inside. She'd survived. He'd done something good with his life. It almost made all the pain and hurt worth it.

The door opened and an elf dressed head to toe in black marched in, his demeanor rod-straight and unforgiving. Seraph's back instantly straightened, her chin up.

"You should not be here," the dark elf told her.

"Nye, I was just—"

"You have patrols."

She nodded quickly and headed out.

"Seraph." His tone yanked her to a stop. "If I find you here again I'll inform Curan and you'll be struck from the Order."

"Yes, sassa." She ducked out the door, gently closing it behind her.

The two guards acknowledged Nye with short, sharp dips of their chins. This elf had authority. He was respected and his words held weight.

He was well built for his role as assassin, dark hair, dark clothes, dark eyes, even his skin was a shade darker than most elves he'd seen. A little shorter and slimmer than the others, but what he lacked in height he clearly made up for in attitude.

Nye studied him with a cool, calculated appraisal. Whatever the outcome, he kept it from his face and addressed the guards with a single glance. "You may leave."

"There are to be two of us here at all times. Curan's orders," the right-most guard replied.

Nye didn't argue, so he was no higher in rank than the infamous Curan, it seemed. He took a few moments then stepped closer, careful to keep outside lunging distance. "Amethyst?"

Disgust rode his tone, but more than that, a quiet thread of anger ran through it too, just beneath the surface. Lysander's being here seemed more personal to this one.

"Your queen, your mother, fixed a collar on Eroan."

Lysander shuffled through all the possible replies and denials and settled on silence. He wasn't yet sure who this elf was or what he wanted.

Nye came closer, deliberately stepping within range. Eroan had that same look about him when Lysander had first seen him, chained to a dungeon wall: defiance, strength, and a hate so pure it ran like blood through his veins. Eroan could have happily killed him back then. The array

of weapons strapped to this elf's shins and thighs might swiftly find their way to a dragon's heart.

"The scars on his back... Whip scars." The elf's top lip quivered. "The things you did to him." His eyes narrowed. "You're an animal."

A right hook swung in, quick and fast. Pain smashed into Lysander's jaw, but it was the surprise that had him hesitating. Nye hadn't broadcasted his intent to attack. A skilled fighter, this one.

Lysander reeled, tasting blood. Nye's fist locked in his shirt and shoved, forcing him back against the beam. The cool kiss of a blade touched Lysander's throat, freezing him still.

"I could cut you open and let you bleed out. Nobody will save you and by the time Eroan knows, you'll be dead."

The elves behind him watched on, faces blank. If Lysander died here, they'd likely tell their elders how he had lashed out, how Nye was defending himself. He could shift but that would ruin everything Eroan was fighting for.

He stayed quiet, careful to measure each breath. Nothing he said would stop this elf if he truly wanted him dead.

Blood pooled in his mouth. He swallowed. Another time, another place, this would have been over already, but that time was not here or now. Eroan's gamble, his dream, was worth too much to throw away.

Nye leaned so close the colors in his dark eyes sparkled. "You're not worth it." He spat, and the warm wetness landed on Lysander's mouth and chin.

Still Lysander stayed still, stayed calm. Perhaps he should feel something, anything, maybe even be afraid?

Nye finally pushed off and strode out the door, slamming it closed behind him.

Lysander wiped a hand across his face, sweeping off the spittle. The two remaining elven guards wore new smiles.

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CHAPTER 27



Eroan

“THE DRAGONS ARE COORDINATING their attacks like nothing we’ve seen from them before.” The Ashford messenger had arrived moments ago, prompting a summons to the Order hall. Breathless and filthy, she looked as though she hadn’t stopped for a single night during the trek. “They’re systematically scouring the forests and laying waste to all settlements they find. The Ashford Higher Order has dispatched elves to the remaining villages, bolstering their defenses. They’re warning all other settlements to prepare.”

Eroan listened, seated beside Curan. The attacks were unusually organized for amethyst but not surprising. They had a new king, one eager to prove himself.

The messenger went on to reveal the number of dead. Too many.

Elisandra had never bothered to attack so methodically. She’d seemed content to ignore elves, for the most part. But Akiem was clearly not his mother.

The messenger left and Eroan listened to the elders’ concerned murmurs. They’d respond by limiting the hunts. Food would be rationed. They’d be prisoners in their own village and hope Akiem overlooked them. It was the same behavior that had gotten so many killed in the past.

Frightened rabbits going to ground. “We should prepare for an assault on the tower,” he interrupted, “as I’ve suggested.”

“Preparations for an assault will take too long,” Curan said. He leaned forward, resting an arm on the table and waited for all eyes to turn to him. “The new dragon king is looking for Lysander.”

Fear skittered down Eroan’s spine. Curan wanted Lysander gone. “We don’t know that for certain. He’s just as likely to be hunting us as a sign he’s in control of this region.”

Curan’s frown shadowed his face. He rolled his lips together and finally looked at Eroan. “Akiem appeared to you on the way to Ashford. You neglected to mention this when I asked for the details of your excursion. Why was that?”

Eroan held Curan’s glare as panic fluttered inside. If he hadn’t kept Akiem’s appearance on the trek to Ashford a secret, Curan would have assumed he wanted to return to France to find Lysander. “I didn’t think it important.”

“You didn’t? And now we’re another fifty elves dead as he searches for the prince you’ve brought into the heart of our village.”

The collective weight of a dozen angry elves drilled into him. “I brought Lysander here for a reason.” Those watching this exchange likely knew most of Eroan’s past by now, of the things that had transpired in the tower, and with that knowledge came a tightening in his chest. The gazes judged him, thinking him compromised. “He has knowledge of the amethyst tower that we’d never have obtained without him.”

“Where is this knowledge? It’s been a day. What do you have from him?”

Eroan licked his lips and looked to Anye. “I can’t ask him to help us tied up like he is.”

“Why are you asking him at all?” This came from Nye, seated at the far end of the table. “They tortured you, we should do the same to him. Get all the answers we need that way.”

Agreeable mutterings joined in, rising in volume. Nausea wet his tongue. Were elves animals now? Where was their honor? Where was their compassion? These were not the elves he’d trained his whole life to protect.

“No!” He thumped a fist against the table, silencing their useless twitterings. “No,” he said again, softer. “We are not like them. Torture is not our way.”

“The fact remains,” Curan interceded, “we do not have enough time to build a force and assault the tower before more villages burn.”

Eroan rolled his tongue over his teeth and swallowed. They would have had enough time had Curan listened to him in the beginning.

“We have what the king wants,” Curan continued. “We don’t need to assault the tower, risking hundreds of lives. We need simply use his brother as bait, drawing Akiem into a waiting ambush.”

Eroan closed his eyes and fell back into the chair as the others argued and discussed the fate of the dragon tied in the food-store. His heart thudded, his gut telling him this was wrong. He hadn’t brought Lysander here to use him as a tool like he’d been used his entire life. He’d brought him here as an equal, as someone who could help them, protect them all. They were supposed to work together.

He looked around the table at the faces of his kin as they discussed handing the dragon over or torturing him, and Eroan’s heart sank. He had hoped it would be different, that they would see the sense in having Lysander as an ally, but all they saw was dragon.

He pushed from the table and left, ignoring calls to return. He couldn’t do this, couldn’t use Lysander in this way. His feet carried him to the store, but he lingered outside, trapped between his duty and what his heart told him he must do. An Assassin of the Order stood for more than killing. This wasn’t about sacrificing one dragon to save elven lives, they just wanted him gone and were grasping at anything that would see it happen. Lysander would die for their ignorance.

He pushed inside the store and barked at the guards to leave.

“Two guards at all times,” one snapped back.

Eroan narrowed his eyes at them both. “Who was it who gave you those blades at your hips? Who taught you how to build and unleash the ballista?” They wavered, glancing between themselves. “Leave,” Eroan dismissed. “I can handle one dragon.”

They finally left, closing the door firmly behind them.

Lysander stood by the beam, his brow pinched. A new bruise blackened his cheek. Someone had struck him.

The fear, the rage, the injustice—it snapped inside Eroan. He crossed the floor, ignored the prince’s widening eyes, and took him in a kiss that stole the worry away. Lysander moved with him, capturing his mouth and working it, responding like flame to kindling, and Eroan knew in that

moment he could never use Lysander like his people wanted. He deserved more from them. He deserved to be heard, to be seen for who he was, not what he was. And he knew bringing him here had been a mistake.

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CHAPTER 28



Lysander

THE ROPES at his wrist strained, pulling taut as Eroan withdrew and Lysander tried to move with him. His lips tingled, the kiss still there, lingering like an unfulfilled promise.

Eroan brushed a thumb across his mouth, his gaze tilted downward, lashes soft and low, and Lysander silently wished him to look up, to see, so he could read the truth in Eroan's eyes.

A dangerous hopeful spark stuttered his heart.

He wet his lips, tasting Eroan's sweetness. "What is this thing between us?"

Eroan looked up, but the sorrow in his eyes made Lysander wish he hadn't asked. Something had happened. Something bad to drive him here, like this. He didn't want to know it, couldn't bear the next terrible thing, whatever it might be.

"Kiss me again."

And Eroan did, moving in like the assassin he was, attacking Lysander's mouth with his. Eroan was everywhere, pushing against him, warm and strong and so very much alive. He pressed in, chest to chest, hip to hip, and rocked, grinding the hard length of him in a way that had Lysander breaking away and gasping. The elf's tongue flicked at his jaw, then his mouth sealed the kiss and roamed down the sensitive column of his neck, and all the

while he rocked against Lysander, driving him to the point of mindless desire. Lysander's cock ached to be touched, and as Eroan's hip rubbed, pleasure sparked. He hissed in through his teeth. He wanted to hold him, bite him, taste him, until all he knew was Eroan. "You drive me wild," he breathed. Then Eroan's mouth was on his again, kissing him like he couldn't get enough.

But all too soon he slowed and doubt cooled Lysander's desire. He couldn't bear it, to have this male and then let him go. It would break him like nothing else had.

He touched Eroan's face, hating the fraught look, as though Eroan had failed or been defeated. The world would try to take Eroan from him. Lysander knew it, he'd known it all along. Eroan was too good for him, too much the dream he could never hold. But sweet nights, he wanted him here and now. Fuck the world. Just this once, he wanted to feel something that was real, because what he saw reflected in Eroan, the heat, the want, the need, it was everything, and he could not let that go.

"Could you ever love a broken thing like me?"

Eroan's rough hands suddenly clutched at Lysander's face, his eyes flared and lips pulled back. "You are a light in the darkness, a diamond in the rough. After everything you've been through, surviving your kin, you still smile. You're kind, and brave, and compassionate. I do not think I would be the same had I suffered as you have. I admire you. For that, and for many things, prince. You are not broken. You are the strongest of us all."

"Eroan, what..."

Eroan froze and it took a moment for Lysander to realize someone else had spoken, someone who had seen them like this, maybe even heard Eroan's words. Precious words Lysander clutched at and hoarded against his heart lest they be stolen from him.

Slowly, Eroan's hands dropped and he turned to reveal an unfamiliar elf inside the doorway, flanked by the two guards Eroan had earlier dismissed. A scar ran the length of this new elf's cheek.

"Curan—" Eroan began, his tone already begging.

The older elf freed two blades from his thigh sheaths. The guards behind did the same. "You would choose the life of this dragon over those of your own people?"

Lysander's protective instincts simmered awake. He would not allow them to hurt Eroan.

Eroan lifted his hands and side-stepped, drawing the three killers away from Lysander. "We don't need to do this."

"The Eroan I knew, the elfling I raised, he never left the queen's tower."

Eroan's face fell and Lysander felt that blow as though it were his own. Curan meant more to Eroan than the others. "Curan, if you'd listen—"

"You liked what they did to you... That's what you told me. And now this?" He flicked a dagger tip toward Lysander. "Did the dragons let you go so you might infiltrate us, so you could bring him here and free him among us?!"

The words struck Eroan, every one making him wince. Lysander's instincts to protect pushed through his thoughts. He clenched his fist and pulled the rope tight, making it groan. But the noise drew Eroan's eye. He shook his head, warning him not to act. How could he not? Eroan might not see it, but Lysander did. They'd turned on him. On them both. Elves were not so different from dragons.

"You're one of them, not one of us." Curan signaled the guards. "Deal with the dragon."

"Wait! What are you going to do with him?" Eroan demanded.

"A trade for peace. No more elves have to die."

"No... Curan, don't... you can't hand him back—"

Curan attacked, but all Lysander saw was Eroan avoid the first slash of daggers before the two guards blocked his view. One jabbed the handle of his blade into Lysander's forehead. His ears rang. A hard fist landed in his gut. Both strikes hit hard and true. Lysander fell into the blows, letting it happen, fighting the urge to shift and tear them all apart, because Eroan was here... and if he turned dragon now, he'd kill them all.

CHAPTER 29



Eroan

CURAN CAME at him with all of the ruthless efficiency of an assassin who had lived too long. Eroan dodged the blades on the first lunge, but without his sword—left in his hut—his only weapon was the single dagger, plucked from its thigh sheath.

“Curan, wai—”

Curan slashed again. Single-minded focus burning in his eyes.

Eroan shied backward, out of Curan’s reach. His back hit a wall.

To Eroan’s right, the guards lay into Lysander. A fist in the face and another low. He doubled over, the hits landing again and again. He spat blood. He’d shift. Any moment now there’d be a whole lot of dragon in the food-store.

Pain zipped up Eroan’s arm. He jolted his dagger up, clashing with one of Curan’s blades, leaving his middle open for the killing blow. Curan hesitated, making the choice between life and death, and cracked his fist into Eroan’s jaw. Blood burst across Eroan’s tongue. His skull rattled. And Curan was on him, his blade pressed to Eroan’s throat, freezing him still.

“You were a son to me.” Curan grabbed at Eroan’s shirt, yanking him close. “You had everything, and you threw it away for a dragon.” His words trembled. Moisture shone in his eyes. “He’s using you to get to us. How can you not see that?”

Eroan heard the words, but Curan was wrong. The guards had Lysander on his knees but he hadn't broken free. He could kill everyone here, could lay waste to the entire village, but he wouldn't because he was better than all of them.

One of the assassins punched his blade into Lysander's thigh. Lysander grunted, and Eroan's heart splintered. This was wrong. He strained against Curan's hold but the old leader had him pinned. "You do not want to make an enemy of me, Curan. Let Lysander go before it's too late."

The older elf's expression slowly crumpled. "Eroan Ilanea is dead. I don't know who you are anymore."

Curan's palm hit Eroan's forehead, jerking his head back. A flash of pain blinded him and then he was falling, the world suddenly dark and cold.



SICKNESS ROILED in Eroan's gut. His head throbbed, hot and heavy. He dabbed at the back of his skull, feeling the tender bruise, then gently poked at his sore jaw. Curan hit like a hammer. Clearly, he'd kept up his training.

Lysander's length of rope was now knotted around Eroan's wrist and tied to the same beam, but Lysander wasn't here now.

He worked his tongue around the sour taste in his mouth. Curan could have killed him. Had Eroan been in his position, protecting the village, he would have killed the threat.

Eroan got to his feet and pulled the rope up the beam, trying a few different angles in the hope he could force his wrists free. When that didn't work, he tried brute force, and leaned away, putting enough strain on the rope for any frayed pieces to unravel. One or two sprung free, but no more.

"Hey!" he called, then listened for a reply outside the food-store. Either there wasn't anyone out there or they had instructions to ignore him.

Anger burned through his veins, boiling away the chilling reminders of the last time he'd been restrained. He would have never believed Curan would tie him up.

He pulled again at the ropes, yanked and snapped at them, tried to unpick the loops with his teeth. More unraveled, and he might manage to escape that way.... in a week.

Lysander didn't have a week.

Eroan trusted these people, he loved them as his own, and they had let him down, proving they were no better than the amethyst dragons they fought against.

Cowards. All of them.

He twisted the rope around his elbow, propped a boot on the beam, and heaved. Pressure tore at his wrist, zipping open grazes in his skin. Blood streamed. The beam didn't move, and with a frustrated shout, he dropped the rope and fell against the beam. He couldn't stay tied up like this, like before, but that time he'd had shackles around his wrists. This was different. This wouldn't last.

The door latch rattled.

Eroan spun, shading his eyes against the sunlit dust clouds. If it was Curan, he'd lay into him, demand to be released. Eroan was an Assassin of the Order, he couldn't be kept like this. This was not the elven way.

But it wasn't Curan. Janna left the door open and walked a few strides into the room before meeting his gaze. Her eyes glistened, edges red. On seeing him now, her lips twisted and twitched, as though she fought to hold back all the things she wanted to say.

He hadn't meant to hurt her. Or anyone. Everything he'd done, he'd done to protect them.

"Janna, please... you have to convince Curan to let me go. He's lost his mind. I haven't done anything wrong. I can't... I can't stay like this." He showed her the rope around his bloody wrist. "He can't do this to me. Tell him to come, to listen."

She bit into her lip and rested her hand on her belly. "You're here by the unanimous agreement of all elders."

Eroan straightened. That couldn't be right. They'd all agreed to keep him here, locked up like some animal? "Who told you this?"

"I was there, Eroan. There was a vote."

"A vote? On what?"

"You're to stay here until the dragon is gone and then you'll be... exiled."

He recoiled, the word as harsh as a slap across the face. "No..." *Exiled?* After everything he'd done for them? "Why... I don't... I don't understand. What did I do that was so wrong?"

A single tear fell. "Curan saw you with the dragon." Her lip wobbled, as though the words alone disgusted her. "All of it."

Eroan closed his eyes. *All of it.* The words of hope he'd shared with Lysander. Bright words, honest words. What was so wrong in that? His whole world had just fallen apart. "It isn't what he thinks." But it was. When he'd left the hall, he'd planned on setting Lysander free, but he'd wanted just a moment between them, something to cling on to and the kiss... the kiss had been everything.

He covered his closed eyes with a hand and tried to steady his breathing, but the ropes, the darkness, and everything he'd ever fought for had turned its back on him. He was falling again, breaking inside like before. "Janna... You know me. Whatever Curan said, he's wrong—"

"He says the dragon has bespelled you with his magic, like they used to do with humans, made you... love him. Is that true?"

He laughed. He couldn't help it. Then the laughter turned cold and he saw his friend's face fall and didn't care. "Lysander has done nothing but good." His voice broke.

"He's killed dozens of us," she said quietly.

But he was different now. Why could they not see that? "He's the only one who dares fight for what's right and he's constantly punished for it. I brought him here thinking I could show you how he's different, and none of you listened. You think he's a monster."

"He is a monster!"

"No," he sobbed, thick emotion choking him, and didn't care. "He's no more a monster than I am."

"It's true," she whispered. "He has some kind of hold over you."

Eroan snarled. "It's not fucking true! His mother... she had some power, but Lysander doesn't. How many times do I have to tell you? Why won't you listen to me? We've been friends all our lives and suddenly you don't trust my word? What did I do to make you hate me so?"

Her hand touched her belly and her tears fell freely now. "I came to say goodbye." She turned for the door.

"No, wait—wait! Janna... just..." He watched her standing there, staring out of the door, wanting to be anywhere else but with him. "Just tell me, please... Where is Lysander? Where did they take him? Is he alive?"

She closed her eyes. "They're taking him to the estuary. He'll be left there for his kind, then the dragons will leave us alone."

His heart jumped. "That won't work."

"It's happening." She slammed the door behind her.

“Janna! Wait!” He tugged at the rope, hissing as raw sores reopened. “Janna, get Curan! I need to see Curan!” Akiem wasn’t just going to leave with Lysander and call it finished. If Curan believed that, he was a fool. And even if Curan was setting up an ambush—as Eroan assumed—without vast elven numbers, it wouldn’t work. All they were doing was exposing themselves and Cheen. Akiem was too clever for a trade. Cheen would suffer. All elves would suffer.

And all because they didn’t trust a dragon who could save them all.

He yelled until his throat was hoarse and pulled on the rope until its strings were thick with blood, and still nobody came.

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CHAPTER 30



Lysander

THEY'D BOUND his hands behind his back and loosely tied his ankles, apparently believing a few ropes could stop him. It was clearly wishful thinking, but Lysander went along with it. The bag was back on his head too as they shuffled him along an uneven path. The briny smell of exposed, wet mud grew stronger. Distant seabird calls reminded him of the times he'd flown along the coast, riding the thermals spiraling up from warm coastal waters.

That old familiar ache returned, the heartfelt loss of no longer being able to fly. To stop the despair from sinking through his bones, he recalled Eroan's kiss back in the storage hut. A real kiss. Not forced, not taken, but freely given. He wallowed in the memory of Eroan's lips on his, his mouth opening, coming together and how every damn trial they'd been through had suddenly seemed worth it. That kiss had sparked alive a different madness, a good one, if anything, it had slipped right beneath all of Lysander's defenses and struck at the part of him he kept so well hidden, he'd wondered if it was still there: his heart.

"Keep moving, dragon..."

Something blunt and cold jabbed him in the back, shoving him out of the memory. He swallowed a growl. They were taking him somewhere close to the sea. *A trade for peace.* Maybe that would work with elves, but

not with dragons. They were likely walking into a trap. He'd tried to tell the leader, Curan, as much, and received a swift kick in the ribs, then had a rag stuffed in his mouth and the bag dumped over his head. All of this was starting to feel eerily familiar.

He heard no dragon calls now, so perhaps this was some other part of the plan.

Hands tugged and pulled him down a slope. He slipped and hit soft, wet mud. One of the elves cursed.

"This would be easier if I could see," Lysander grumbled through the rag.

Nobody listened. He was pulled onto hard, wooden boards and marched along the uneven surface.

"Take him to the end," Curan said. "Watch the skies. If any arrive that aren't black, immediately retreat."

Hands pulled him along. He had a dozen questions on his lips. Some remarks too, ones that would probably get him another punch in the gut. He was beginning to wonder if, like him, Eroan wasn't like his people either.

The bag pulled up and off his head, and the rag was yanked from his mouth, leaving fluff and threads behind. He spat and peered into the sunlight. Seabirds swirled above, but no dragons.

The dark-haired elf who had gotten the first punch in glared right at Lysander. "I hear dragons don't suffer weakness in their own broods. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll kill you right here."

"You're a piece of work, elf," he grunted. The only other elf here was the old, grizzled one with the scar. Curan.

They stood at the end of a wooden boardwalk designed to float when the tide washed in. As the estuary river was out, the boards sat on the mud and led a path back to the estuary bank where the forest provided plenty of cover. He couldn't see them, but there would be elves back there, camouflaged out of sight.

"If you hope to meet my brother—"

Curan nodded and Nye's fist found a new home in Lysander's gut, doubling him up, then his hand gripped him by the hair and pulled. "You don't get a say in any of this."

Lysander's nerves frayed. This was a mistake. Akiem didn't negotiate. "He'll. Kill. You."

Another punch, and his breath left him, dropping him to a knee. He tasted blood again, likely from the cuts on the inside of his cheeks from the earlier beating they'd dealt him. He spat in the mud. "You have no idea who you're dealing with. This deal reeks of desperation. He'll draw you all out ____"

Nye pulled on his hair, arching Lysander back. "I've been killing dragons my entire life. I know the monster we face."

A black cloud sailed across the sun, blotting out the warm light and sweeping in a sudden chill. Lysander saw it over Nye's shoulder and realized with a start that it was no cloud. Akiem swept in, upriver, almost near-silent and filled the sky above them, his long reaching wings beating at the air, whipping up salty water.

He dwarfed them all, made them look like pitiful ants standing before a god. In the light of day, Akiem's obsidian scales absorbed the light. He didn't shine. No light could touch him.

Akiem's golden eyes scanned the tree line, looking for the trap. Of course, there would be one. Nye's words had implied enough. But Akiem hadn't lived as long as he had by trusting elves. Or anyone, for that matter.

His penetrating gaze fell to Lysander and the angle of his wing beats shifted, whipping the air into a swirling frenzy as he came in low to land in the mud. The second he set down, the shift rolled through him, black smoke knotting and lashing, until the man strode from the magical storm, sparks shivering off his form. Long, smooth black hair flowed over his shoulders, not a single strand out of place. His face angular and pale, eyes dark. A thin, jewel-encrusted band sat low on his forehead—a subtle crown and a reminder of who these foolish elves had summoned.

Lysander, still on his knees, hands and ankles tied, breathed heavily through his nose and tried to steady his racing heart. In their time apart, Akiem had changed in subtle ways. A few more lines had collected between his brows, making his face seem sharper. There was much of their mother in him, so much in fact, Lysander could almost feel her here with them, her glare shaving off layers of his armor.

"Brother," Akiem acknowledged, standing ankle deep in mud and not caring.

Lysander became very aware of his trussed state and peppering of bruises. Being beaten by elves was a new low, even for him.

Nye caught his arm and yanked him to his feet, and that too reminded Lysander of his apparent weakness. He wondered if Akiem could smell Dokul on him. He'd wanted to stand proud when he next saw his brother, like he had in the bronze warren, but now the time had come and his instincts just wanted him to drop and roll, exposing his belly and neck to the king. That too was Dokul's doing. The son of a breeding-bitch had ruined him.

"Take him and let us be," Curan said, tone typically lofty.

Akiem slowly slid his glare to the elf, then to Nye, "Did you beat him, elf?" he asked, sensing animosity.

"He resisted," Nye replied.

Akiem's dark eyebrow shot up. The lie was obvious. Had Lysander resisted they wouldn't have been here making a trade. To prove the point, Lysander tugged on the rope binding his wrists. It groaned, snapped, and fell to the boardwalk. He snapped the rope around his ankles next. Both elves valiantly attempted not to let their surprise show and failed. Lysander watched the older elf in the corner of his eye, hoping he realized he'd *allowed* them to beat him and what that meant.

"Why did you not fight them?" Akiem asked Lysander. "You could easily have broken those ropes much sooner than this."

Akiem wouldn't understand. He never had. "I'm tired of fighting."

The elves either side of him shifted nervously, sensing they'd been played. Lysander wanted to tell them to believe him, like he'd tried with Chloe. She'd realized too late to save her people, but these elves still had a chance. "Let them go, Akiem."

His brother puffed a gentle laugh through his nose and spread his hands. "Do you see any shackles? They are free to do as they please."

Unease crawled down his spine. There was more to this. Akiem would never arrive alone. He knew the elves were armed and he'd come prepared to fight. If the dragons weren't in the skies, then they had to be in the forest, closing in from behind.

"Do you see any dragons?" His brother smiled a cold reptilian smile and Lysander's heart constricted. They'd all die, and nothing would change. He had to stop this before it began.

Stepping forward to the edge of the boardwalk brought him almost eye to eye with Akiem. They'd had their differences, but that was the way of dragons. Fight or die. Akiem was just another survivor. "Don't harm them

and I'll submit in every way." Akiem's top lip twitched. "Leave them all alive today and I'll follow your every word, brother. You will have my support in everything that you do, as king." A fractional narrowing of Akiem's eyes told Lysander he was getting through his brother's armor. But it wasn't enough. The sickness was back, coating Lysander's throat. He knelt and bowed his head. "You will be my king. Just let them walk away." He hoped the Order leader Curan heard every word and heard the sacrifice behind it. He likely wouldn't understand what Lysander was doing, not for a while, but someday soon he'd remember and perhaps it would be enough.

Akiem placed a gentle hand on Lysander's head. Relief lifted his heart. The elves would live to fight another day. But then his brother leaned down and whispered, "But I am already your king, and they are already dead."

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CHAPTER 31



Eroan

SERAPH'S ARGUING tones from outside the door dragged him from a heavy malaise. He couldn't make out the full sentences, but she seemed to be urging the guards away. Dragging himself to his feet, he watched the door and waited. Curan would never allow her to be here. She was taking a huge risk. He'd tell her to leave. She could still have a promising future in the Order but not if she associated with him... a *betray*er.

The door flung open and Seraph strode in, sword at her back, it's twin in her hand. "You have to get to the estuary." She wasted no time in bringing the sword down on the rope, cutting him free from the beam. Then she took the bindings at his wrists and gently used the sharpened tip of his blade to pick them apart, finally freeing his bloodied and sore wrists. "They've taken Lysander to Akiem. They're all there right now, ballista trained on the sky. As soon as Akiem takes Lysander, they'll fire on both."

Eroan rubbed at his raw wrists and took his sword from her, grateful for its comforting weight. "Thank you... I won't forget this."

She nodded, eyes narrowing. "Go save him, Eroan. Like he saved us."

He ran from the food-store, veered into the forest, and plunged deeper into the brush.

Save him. Like he saved us.

The seconds raced along with him and he feared, with every beat of his heart, that he was already too late.

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CHAPTER 32



Lysander

THEY'RE ALREADY DEAD...

Whatever agreement Akiem had made with the elves, it was a lie. His brother was a predator. Words meant nothing. Bargains with elves meant nothing because elves were nothing.

Lysander lifted his face and Akiem trailed warm, rough fingers down Lysander's cheek, the touch curiously light. The look in his eyes easily mistaken for brotherly compassion, but Lysander knew it for what it truly was: pity.

"Run," Lysander said.

Akiem blinked. The words weren't meant for him.

Lysander whirled to Curan, "*Run now!*"

The elves backed away, but they weren't moving fast enough. Why weren't they running? Stupid, stubborn elves. "Run, damn you! He has you where he wants you. Run now or die!"

They mutely scanned the skies and all around, but with no sign of any dragons, why would they run? Lysander felt the same sinking realization he had with Chloe. Akiem was right. They were all dead. Lysander didn't know how his brother was planning to kill them, but Akiem rarely failed.

Akiem's laugh was a rich, dark seduction, growing deeper and more luscious as he stepped backward through the mud. "You always did spoil

my games, *brother*.” Akiem’s teeth snapped together.

The mud at either side of the boardwalk bubbled and heaved, and fear plummeted through Lysander as he suddenly understood his brother’s game. Mountains of mud lifted out of the estuary beds. Wings tore free, enormous heads lifted, crowns poking through, eyes blinking out from beneath their camouflage. The amethyst flights had been here all along, buried in the estuary mud.

“Run!” Lysander yelled.

Nye and Curan bolted back along the boardwalk, but while his flight had pulled themselves from the mud, Akiem had shifted. His suddenly enormous dragon form slammed a foot down between the elves and the shore, smashing the boardwalk and cutting off their retreat. He lowered his head, golden eyes narrowing in on his prey, and roared a skull-splitting roar loud enough to shake the world to its knees. Curan and Nye skidded to a stop, baring their tiny knives like they believed they truly had a chance.

Lysander started after them. If he got between them, Akiem might hesitate.

Akiem’s tail swept in from the side, slamming into both elves, throwing them off the boardwalk and into the mud, straight into the boiling, heaving mass of emerging dragons.

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CHAPTER 33



Eroan

THE FOREST TREMBLED beneath the weight of a powerful roar. Eroan heard his kin shouting commands. He was too late. The dragons were here. Through the trees ahead, mud-caked mounds appeared to heave out of the estuary, coming alive before his eyes. And among the flapping mud-coated wings, Akiem's matte black scales gleamed.

"Lower the ballistae!" the elves yelled.

"Aim them down now! Down! Not at the skies!"

Eroan halted, breathless, and took in the chaotic scene. The ballistae weren't aligned. He scanned the line for Curan or any sign of leadership, but nobody seemed to be directing the assault.

"Where's Curan?" he asked the nearest ballista operator. The male ignored him, consumed with the effort of trying to wind down the angle of the enormous weapon.

"*Fire! Fire!*" The shouts bounced around the line.

Some freed their huge arrows, but their aim was off and ill-organized. The arrows flew, missing their targets. And now they were exposed.

Dragons turned toward the tree line—toward the hidden elves.

"Assassins!" Eroan yelled. "*Aim at the king, at the black beast! No other!*" Striking Akiem was the only chance they had. If they could bring him down, the others would scatter. "*Those not on a ballista, form up!*" He

pushed forward, ahead of the ballistae, elves falling in-line behind him.
“*Protect the ballista lines!*”

Dragons slammed into the tree line, waves of teeth and claws charging closer, and Eroan’s assassins roared toward their end.

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CHAPTER 34



Lysander

ENORMOUS ARROWS ARCHED through the skies and punched into the mud. Some found their dragonscale targets, but not many, and now the dragons were turning toward the elves, intent on digging them out of the trees. The screaming started. More arrows flew in. Dragon-fire would soon strafe those trees. Elves would die.

Why did nobody listen to him?

Lysander turned his attention to Akiem. Stopping him would stop the assault. Akiem had no interest in those on the shore. He'd found one of the fallen elves in the mud and was plodding toward it, dragon-eyes fixated on the stumbling male clutching at his side.

Wading through the mud, Lysander lumbered closer. Arrows smacked the mud beside him. Cold globules splattered his face, blurring his vision. Screams confirmed what he knew to be inevitable now. They were all dead, they just didn't know it yet. But if he could stop Akiem, there was a chance he could pull the flight back.

Akiem circled the mud-coated elf, hunched low, watching his tiny prey try and struggle. The elf stumbled, falling forward. On turning his face, his white scar confirmed him as Curan. It was no mistake Akiem had singled out the elven leader to torture.

The dark elf—Nye—thrust a dagger at Lysander, but with the mud sucking at his legs, the elf's attack came up short. A growl bubbled inside. Lysander let it lose, warning the elf off. "Get in my way and your Curan dies." He pointed at the cat and mouse game. "Go back to your elves in the trees, help them survive. You cannot do any more here."

"I can kill you," the vicious elf panted, eyes burning through the mud mask.

"Not today. Now leave!" Lysander pulled himself forward, listening for Nye's attempt to stab him in the back, but when it didn't come, he plunged on, clawing at the mud, dragging himself closer.

Akiem's growls drowned out the sound of dying elves. He reared up, firepit bubbling, then brought a foot down on the elf, crushing him under the mud. The Order leader's hand flailed, desperately seeking something to cling onto.

"Akiem, stop!" He had to get Akiem's attention. "Stop! Stop and I will ensure there's no dissent in your flights. Kill him though, and I will turn the amethyst flights against you. Your rule will forever be a fragile one. Is that what you want?"

The dragon huffed and lifted his foot, but not from submission. He had Lysander in his sights now. *Better yet*, those golden eyes said, *I kill you here*.

Lysander looked for signs that the elf was alive, saw his fingers twitch, and feared the worst. Whatever happened now, he'd done all he could do to save Curan. Now he had to save himself.

The shift rolled through him, stretching him open, filling him out, until he was a mass of super-heated rage and ancient instinct. He planted his four-legged stance over the fallen elf and fed all of the fury into the firepit low in his gullet, feeding the flames until the heat beat like an enormous second heart, too hot and too powerful to hold on to. Akiem lunged and Lysander unleashed the fire.

CHAPTER 35



Eroan

AN ORANGE HUE poured over fallen trees and broken bodies. The dragons had ripped great holes in the forest, through the elven line, and now dragon-fire boiled the air, igniting remaining trees.

Eroan hunkered down, shielding himself from the heat, and turned toward the source of the flame.

Lysander. He fought Akiem. The dragon king was distracted, turned away, exposing his back and crown to the elven line.

“FIRE!” Eroan yelled. “Fire at the king now!”

The ballistae let loose their dragon-teeth tipped arrows. They soared, arching higher, then converged on the black beast’s head.

Die, you scourge.

Arrows plunged into his neck, and the beast wailed, but none had hit below the crown.

“RELOAD!”

A wall of scale and claws slammed into the line from above. From one moment to the next, Eroan was face-down in the dirt, ears ringing, his body a beating mass of pain. He fumbled through the grass, crawling forward, and rolled onto his back.

An amethyst loomed over him, eyes narrowed to slits and pinned on Eroan. It pulled its head back and filled its firepit so the scales low on its

throat glowed hotter and brighter.

Eroan scrambled toward the beast, ducked beneath its chest and thrust the blade up, through the beast's scales, into ribs, to the hilt, then heaved every ounce of strength into tearing the blade free. A clawed foot swung in. Eroan rolled, narrowly escaping. Then Nye was here, high up on the creature's neck, blades flashing as he plunged both down behind the dragon's crown. The dragon twitched, its eyes rolled, and it fell with a ground-shuddering thump, throwing up clouds of dirt and debris.

Nye emerged from the raining dirt and clasped Eroan's reaching hand, pulling him to his feet. "They have Curan."

Eroan heard him, but the devastation sprawled in all directions briefly tripped his thoughts. The ballistae were shattered. Dead elves lay among huge, fallen dragons. By Alumn, this should never have happened. So many dead... "It's over."

Nye blocked his view of the devastation. Mud and blood smeared across his face and his eyes held a haunted sheen. "It's not over. We have to save Curan."

"Go to ground!" Eroan bellowed for anyone left standing, his voice fracturing mid-way through the order. Those still alive echoed the retreat order through the elven ranks. They would not yet return to Cheen. It was too dangerous. Instead, they'd scatter, losing any dragons on their scent and only return home once it was safe. Cheen *would* be safe. But the losses were devastating.

The dragons, perhaps sensing their victory, had withdrawn and now seemed to be gathering in the mud, converging around Lysander and Akiem.

"He's out there, Eroan." Nye gestured through the burning trees. "We have to help him."

Eroan sheathed his sword. "We wait."

"No, we have to help him now!"

At least twelve dragons filled the estuary. There was no way to get through them. In all likelihood, Curan was already dead. "It's suicide."

Nye's mouth quivered in a snarl. "That's never stopped you before. It's Curan, Eroan. We can't leave him."

Curan's last words echoed in Eroan's mind. *Eroan Ilanea is dead to me.* "His fate is in Alumn's hands."

CHAPTER 36



Lysander

AMETHYST DRAGONS CLOSED in from all sides. Less than Akiem had arrived with, but enough to do him some serious damage.

Akiem hadn't escaped unscathed. A gash on his rear leg oozed dark blood. It wouldn't be enough to stop him, just piss him off.

Lysander padded in a circle, keeping the fallen elf beneath him. Alive or dead, it didn't matter, he had to keep this one elf—their leader—safe. He snapped his teeth at any amethyst who dared come too close, like he had the bronze. But his own brood moved differently. More lithe and slippery, they arched their long necks, lashed long, sharp, barbed tails, and teased with the promise of purple dragon-fire burning in their firepits. Then, Akiem was in front of them all, staring Lysander down.

He remembered Eroan's words about getting inside amethyst, and the hard look in his eyes when he'd spoken of Akiem. Eroan wanted more than the amethyst threat gone, he wanted Akiem dead. Wasn't Lysander better able to help the elves from inside the tower? Better that than his life ending here, dead in the mud.

Reluctantly, with the fire still churning low on his throat, he dropped his head, exposing the vulnerable spot behind his crown. Submitting. It shouldn't have felt so wrong. After Dokul, this was just dragon-play, but it

still tore him up. But submitting now would save him. Akiem needed complete authority. He needed Lysander to bow.

Akiem struck. Hard, long teeth sank into Lysander's neck an inch below the soft spot behind his crown but close enough that Lysander couldn't help the fearful yelp. Akiem's powerful jaws twisted, forcing Lysander onto his side, crushing his bad wing beneath him and exposing his belly. Akiem spread his broad black wings, Lysander still in his jaws, and heaved them both into the air. The amethyst flights followed, filling the sky with wings, shaking off their mud camouflage, leaving behind a scarred landscape littered with the dead.

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CHAPTER 37



Eroan

SOUP-LIKE TIDAL WATERS had swept in and covered much of the mud, leaving just a few banks exposed. Eroan's fingers ached, numbed and cold from digging out the dead. Wordlessly, he and Nye dragged elven bodies out of the water, to the relative safety of the dry bank so at least the river didn't take their remains. Their families would come for them, once it was safe.

Wet, cold clothes clung to him, heavy with mud, but the seething rage warmed him through. He'd spent too many hours of his life collecting the dead and broken dire news to too many loved ones.

This slaughter could have been avoided.

Wading through thigh-deep water, mud sucked him down, urging him to stop. His bones ached. So did his soul.

Nye gasped and staggered forward, toward a lump of driftwood stuck in a raised mudbank. The gnarled bit of wood moved, twitching. Eroan surged forward.

Curan was half-buried, but enough of him lay exposed for Nye to desperately try to stem the blood-pumping wound in his gut. Thick, almost black blood mingled with dirty water and oozed between Nye's fingers. Most of Curan's middle was a shredded mass of flesh and bone. He would not survive.

Curan lifted a trembling, pale hand. Eroan automatically took it, kneeling beside him. The male's grip was ice.

"Eroan...?" Blood dribbled from the corner of Curan's mouth, its color so bright against the male's milky skin.

"Don't speak." Eroan tried to smile, to offer some kind of reassurance, and failed. Curan's old eyes leaked. He knew he was dying. "You're not alone, sassa."

His face contorted in pain. His hand tightened on Eroan's but his lashes lowered, focus drifting. "...So... sorry."

"Don't speak."

"So sorry... *son*."

Eroan's vision blurred. Grief tugged at his chest, trying to rip out his heart. He cushioned Curan's head in his free hand and gently lowered his forehead to the male's, so close he could almost fall into his soul through his wide, pained eyes. "Be at peace, Curan. There is nothing to forgive."

"I was... wrong," Curan whispered. "... about your dragon."

Eroan squeezed his eyes closed. Cool, quiet tears fell.

"You must lead them." Curan switched his grip from Eroan's hand to his arm, and pulled, suddenly fierce in his conviction. "Lead them to victory. They will follow you, Eroan. It was always going to be you." Curan's trembling, mud-covered fingers cupped Eroan's face, smearing his tears. The old assassin smiled. His trembling slowed. "Xena told me once... how you will save us all."

"Yes..." He wanted to say more, but the words lodged in his throat.

Curan's eyes defocused. His grip slipped and fell away.

"No," Nye whispered.

The world shifted around him, despair spiraling in. *Son*. Running a hand down Curan's face he closed his eyes and lay the only family he'd ever really known to rest. He pressed his forehead to Curan's. "May Alumn's light embrace you..."

CHAPTER 38



Lysander

NOTHING HAD CHANGED in the tower. He hadn't really expected it to but had foolishly hoped Akiem's rule would be different to Elisandra's. Lysander's chamber was cold, dust-filled and strewn with cobwebs. He stood staring at the emptiness, wondering where the Lysander who had once lived here had gone because he didn't feel like him anymore. That creature had stumbled half-drunk through life, under his mother's thumb, raging at a world, expecting it to change for him. Elisandra had been right, he hadn't known savagery, hadn't known anything.

He was alive, so there was that.

But at what point did just surviving become too much of a torture?

A knock rapped on the door behind him. "Akiem will see you in the throne room," a stranger said.

Lysander nodded, sending the lower on his way, and followed moments later to find the throne room packed wall-to-wall with Akiem's amethyst subjects. A sprawl of amethyst females lounged around the queen's old throne, Akiem the center of their attention. The harem wasn't servicing him, like they would have been Elisandra, but the sight of Akiem in their mother's place, wearing the same slanted smile, startled Lysander's thoughts. Apparently, it was good to be king.

As he walked up the center aisle, idle chatter dwindled. He stopped in front of Akiem, the silence suddenly suffocating.

Akiem leaned forward. He flicked a hand toward the floor. “Kneel, brother.”

The nape of his neck prickled, unease still there. Unless he wanted to challenge Akiem’s rule, he had no choice but to do as ordered. This was no different to how he’d submitted at the estuary. Slowly, he knelt. Moments passed. Lysander looked up to find his brother smiling down just like Elisandra used to. Nerves roiled in his gut.

“You smell like bronze filth.”

Lysander worked his jaw around the things he couldn’t say. “Is there a point to having me on my knees?” When Akiem didn’t answer, Lysander’s nerves twitched. “Or maybe you’d like me to suck you off, brother? For old times’ sake.”

A dangerous tick pulled at Akiem’s hard mouth.

Now it was Lysander’s turn to smile. They had never talked of the time Akiem had invited Lysander’s affections in a way their mother-dearest wouldn’t have approved of—it had been a shared rebellion, a way to slip around Elisandra’s hold, or maybe Akiem had gotten curious about males. He’d liked it too. Akiem had always been better than Lysander at hiding his desires.

“Bind him,” Akiem ordered.

Guards rushed in, grabbing at Lysander’s arms. He growled at them, males he knew, males he’d *taught* and fought alongside. He couldn’t fight a whole tower full of dragons. Predictably, chains rattled across the stone floors. They clamped shackles in place, weighing his wrists down behind his back.

“You had better lock them tight,” Lysander warned. “I escaped some just like these during the bronze coupling.”

“Oh, I know...” Mirann’s smooth voice sailed through the grumbling crowd.

A guard jerked Lysander’s head back so he had no choice but to see the golden-painted bitch saunter toward him, sliding a cat-o-nine-tails whip through her hand. It had been so long and her presence here so shocking, he briefly forgot the shackles, the amethyst watching, and forgot about Akiem until his brother moved from the throne and landed a punch to Lysander’s ribs.

The breath tore from his lungs and a cool numbness spread outward. “For abandoning amethyst,” Akiem snarled.

Not a punch... He looked down to see a dagger hilt protruding from his chest. That couldn’t be right. Why would Akiem stab him... What had he meant, *abandoning* amethyst? Gods, it hurt.

“That should make it a little harder to shift...” Mirann crouched in front of him and used the whip-handle to turn his head, settling her whisper in his ear, “Shift, and that blade might migrate to your heart, my pet, and we can’t have that.”

His head numbed, as though he’d downed too many bottles of wine. No, this wasn’t right, this wasn’t fair. Akiem was harsh, but not like this... This was Mirann’s idea. Her doing. Revenge, perhaps, for the fall of the bronze warren. He didn’t know, and now his thoughts were softening, melting away through his fingers. Unconsciousness was coming, and then he’d be at Mirann’s mercy. This hadn’t been the plan. Akiem wasn’t supposed to do this.

Power writhed beneath his skin, trying to roll over and spill free. “There is nothing you can do to me, Mirann, your wretched father hasn’t already done,” he slurred, losing his grip on reality.

Mirann’s golden eyes sparkled, like pools of molten ore trying to pull him in. “Challenge accepted, Lysander Bronze.”

“Take him deep beneath the tower,” Akiem ordered. “Do with him what you will but let it be known throughout my kingdoms, I have no brother.”

Bitter betrayal lanced adrenaline through Lysander’s veins. “You son of a bitch!” He bucked against the hands holding him. Pain lanced through his chest, sparking into some vital part of his body and drenching him in weakness. “I will serve you! You don’t need to do this!”

Akiem’s growl rumbled through the room. “You are an elf sympathizer. You are a weak and broken creature.” He settled back onto this throne and allowed the members of his harem to slither closer. “But worse than all of that, you killed Queen Elisandra. Be grateful Mirann argued for your life. You are hereby disowned by amethyst. I intend to let you rot in the bowels of this tower for the rest of your miserable existence.”

The guards manhandled Lysander back down the aisle, dragging him when he kicked out, and Mirann led the way like a golden snake winding her way through amethyst brood. Lysander struggled for as long as his body held out, even managed to slip their grip once only to get as far as a sudden

wall of snarling amethyst lowers. He bared his teeth and growled back at them, but then the guards had a hold of him again, dragging him down into the cool, dark confines of the lower tower foundations. They threw him into a cell eerily similar to the one Eroan had been kept in. Panic clutched at his heart and the dagger in his ribs ground against bone, snatching his breaths away. Chains rattled, but he was on his knees again, staring at the floor, trying not to let the thumping ache in his head and chest take him under.

“Hold him still.”

Her voice drew his attention back into the room. That voice, as smooth as honey.

Hands gripped his shoulders, holding him down. Warnings growled up his throat. “Touch me and I’ll fucking kill you all.”

“There, there... darling, pet.” Mirann held up something clear and cylindrical about the width of her thumb with a needle on the end and a plunger on the other. Filthy brown liquid sloshed inside. “This will make everything better.”

He’d never seen a device like that before. She pointed the needle toward the ceiling and pushed the plunger. A dribble of liquid spilled from the sharp end. The hands on his shoulders pushed and Lysander hissed through his teeth at the lowers. “You think you have me? You’ve no fucking idea who I am now. Do this, and I’ll hunt you all down and kill your broods, making you watch.”

A fist struck his right eye, reopening the elves’ scabbed wounds.

“Hold him, I said!” Mirann screeched.

A hand clamped around his jaw, holding his head rigid, and fingers squeezed into his upper arms.

Mirann moved in, her needle device poised. “You’re all mine now, Lysander Bronze.” She pressed the tip of the needled against his neck. It pierced his skin and a cool, alien sensation spilled into his veins, shivering through his chest, down his arms, sinking into his gut. “And with you...” she whispered, stroking her cool finger down his cheek. “All amethyst will soon be under me.”

The cold feeling shocked his heart, spasming through muscle, then he was falling without ever hitting the ground.



HE DREAMED of silver and bronze, of blood in his mouth and cold hands scorching his skin. Waking was worse. The tremors wouldn't stop. Whatever she'd dumped into his veins was trying to eat him from the inside. He shivered, hot in the dark, hearing his mother's laugh and Akiem's words over and over. ... *a weak and broken creature.*

It wasn't true. It wasn't. But the words hammered in, over and over, chipping off his armor. Then more of that poisonous shit was forced into his veins, leaving him breathless and lost, curling into himself to keep out the cold.

"Oh my kit... what have they done to you?"

He recognized the voice as someone he should know, someone important who had always been with him, but he searched the dark only to find he was alone.

"Don't let them break you." He heard Eroan and sobbed, clawing at the dirt-encrusted stone floor.

There were others here, some faces he knew, some he didn't. They seemed like phantoms, and he couldn't fix them in his mind to know if they were real or dreams. Amalia was here, her laugh like the light he chased. Then Mirann was there, her hands forced between his thighs, around his throat. She whispered things, things he couldn't wrap his mind around, about his being emerald, about power and control and things he didn't understand.

He didn't want to be here. He wanted to be on the wing, soaring far and free from the darkness and pain. He wanted to feel the warmth of an elusive elf beneath his hands and see his soft smile again. The dream of Eroan was replaced by Mirann, her body a weight on his hips, her hands on his chest. He rolled his eyes, reality dragging his heavy body up from beneath the surface. Cold stone bruised his shoulders and hips, Mirann's every movement driving him deeper. She slammed her mouth over his, shocking him awake, and suddenly he felt it all. Her cunt riding him, his body a tool beneath hers.

With his hands still tied, all he could do was buck and twist, but the strain left him weak, his head spinning. She was all over him again, and this time her hand locked around his throat. *Just like her fucking father...* Ice coated his skin and chilled him deeply, taking him to the faraway place. Let the bitch have him now, he'd make her pay for it all... just as soon as... he could find himself again and stop the horrible hollow ache in his heart.

“You’ll bow to me. You’ll submit in every way to me and so will your pathetic jeweled brother.” She showed him the needle and wagged it. “Tell me you’re mine.”

He bared his teeth. “Take out... the dagger.” It still protruded from his chest, beating hot and hard like a second heart, killing him with every hour that passed. Or maybe that was her poison carving out his death.

“Oh, no no no...” She straightened, looming over him in her tarnished bronze lamé gown, all of her nakedness exposed beneath. She’d touched him all over, inside too. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m not anyone’s.”

“The coupling... do you remember that? You’re my emerald now, to do with as I please. Dokul shouldn’t have hunted you, but it doesn’t matter. I have you now.”

His head was a jumble of broken things. Everything smelled of metal and blood. His gut heaved, his body a wrecked weak thing.

“Maybe just a little more of this to help you surrender—” Her weight straddled his legs, leaning in close to deliver the poison again. Lysander swallowed, breathing her blood-like scent in through his nose, letting it fuel his rage, and then, when the needle pricked his skin, he thrust his head forward, crunching against some part of her face, both hard and soft.

She screeched, but instead of backing off, her teeth sank into his neck, piercing deep. Lysander jolted still, the dragon in him suddenly and utterly subdued.

Then the needle went into his thigh and the cycle began all over again.



“FIX HIM.”

Someone new had arrived. She smelled like woodsmoke and mead and reminded him of when he was a kit, his body sore and cut up from another fight. Lysander rocked. No more... he couldn’t take any more of the poison in his veins and her hands all over him.

“He’s useless like this.” Mirann’s boots clipped the stone floor until the sound faded.

The chamber door slammed.

No more...

Make it stop.

A hand touched his tingling shoulder. With his arms still bound behind him, the small touch burned. He turned away, tucking himself tighter into the corner.

“Listen to me... listen... You’re a survivor.”

He blinked, wondering if she was real, this new female with a bundle of gray hair and kitchen robes. Of course he knew her. She’d always been there after he and Akiem had fought, always been ready to heal his and his brother’s wounds. “Carline?” he croaked.

“Yes, my dear kit...” Her hand settled on his shoulder again and this time he let her turn him toward her, let her pull him close and wrap her arms around him. “It’s all right. It’s almost over.”

“... hurts.”

“I know. You must be strong. You can survive this too.”

He wanted to crawl into her lap and hide there, wanting to shift and bury himself under his wings, but shifting would be worse. The knife was too close to his heart. “She’s in my head, her and... Mother. Make it stop, Carline. Take the knife out or push it in. Don’t care. Just make it stop.”

“Listen to me, and listen hard, Lysander.” Carline’s warm, healing hands touched his face and that warmth poured through him, filling out his bones, chasing away the pain. “You are not like them. You never were. But you weren’t a mistake. You are the answer to everything.” He squeezed his eyes closed. Her hand stroked his head, over his hair.

“... weak.” *Broken.*

“No...” she crooned. “No. You are the strongest of them all.”

Tremors clutched his body again, leaving him breathless. “I c-can’t.”

The door swung open. “Enough!” Mirann snapped. “Get out!” She pulled Carline away from him and shoved the old dragon toward the open doorway.

“It was never meant to be this way,” Carline growled. “He’ll be your end. The end of all of us.”

Mirann laughed. “*That* will be the end of us.” She pointed at him and the shivering started up again. “His mind is mine. The rest of him will follow.”

“You play a dangerous game, bronze. Does your father know what you’re doing to him? He is of the old ways. He will not allow—”

“Get out, old hag.”

Carline cast him one long, steady look, probably trying to convey something, but Lysander failed to grasp it. After she'd left, he stared through the open door. Freedom had never felt so far away.

Mirann's outline grew until she was his whole world. She straddled his legs and crouched to look him in the eyes. "Feeling better, pet?"

He wet his cracked lips. "Take out... the dagger."

"Hmm..." She cupped his face. Her hand warm against his feverish skin. "Ready to stop fighting me?"

Thinking felt like rummaging through broken glass. "Stop the drug... Let me think."

Rocking onto her knees, she leaned in and nipped at his lip. "Or maybe it's time for a change of tact." She moved so fast it made his vision blur. But he saw the whip, saw her smile, and turned away too late to avoid the worst the nine-tails could deliver. Agony tore down his face and neck. He gasped, the pain too bright and too fast to think around.

"You." Again. His body screamed. "Are." Again. Rage and power tore through him, burning out the poison. "Mine." Again. The urge to shift loomed. Death would be a release from this. The dragon in him stirred, revitalized by Carline's healing touch. He took the raw power, shaped its weight, used it and funneled it, pouring that vicious intent into his arms, straining against the shackles around his wrists.

A link snapped, his wrists separated.

Lysander shot out a hand, catching the whip's tails before she could land them again.

Mirann screamed her rage.

With his free hand, he pulled at the dagger handle. It slipped free with a wet, sucking sound.

Freedom.

Mirann was on him, smothering and heavy. Her needle device flashed. He caught her face in his hand. The needle slammed into his shoulder, poison sinking in, but it was too late. Thoughts icy calm, he smashed her skull against the wall. Once. Twice. Bone cracked. A thrill raced through him.

Her sickening poison tried to get its claws in and send him reeling, but he was on his feet now, the shift reined in, but lending him the strength to fight. He staggered, the room tilting, and dropped Mirann in a heap.

She panted. Her fingers twitched. Her eyes rolled.

She wasn't dead.

He needed her to be dead.

Picking up her whip, he circled around her, watched her writhe and twitch. She rolled her golden eyes up, seeing him. Icy calm wrapped him in nothingness. He brought the whip's tails down with a vicious crack. She bucked, still alive, mumbling and reaching. Begging. Good.

He swung the whip again, again, needing to grind her existence into the stone floor. She grunted. Again. The whip bit, tearing, spilling blood through the links in her metal dress. Again, the tails cracked, breaking bits of Lysander's own armor off with every strike. Blood rained and pooled, and it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Again, he beat her, roaring out all the hurt, until nothing about the noises he made was human.

He came back to himself oddly calm, sitting across from the mangled wreckage of Mirann. The air reeked of blood and shit and he probably should have cared that he was coated in all of those things, but his head was quieter now than it had been in forever. She wasn't dead. Death was a release, and she hadn't earned hers. She would suffer, like he had. But first, he had a message to send.

He hauled himself to his feet, tucked the dripping whip into his belt, fingers slick with blood, then scooped Mirann's motionless body off the floor, over his shoulder, and walked from the chamber.



NOISES RUMBLLED from the feasting hall. His feet carried him up through the bowels of the tower, toward the sounds of a gathering. Lowers scattered from his path or cowered, hoping to be unseen. But he saw them. Saw every single one and marked them in his mind. He would not forget their betrayal.

Either none had dared run ahead and tell Akiem or his brother hadn't cared, because when Lysander entered the hall and carried Mirann's body among them, it took a few minutes for the shock waves to ripple through their number.

Akiem was sitting where their mother used to sit behind the long feasting table, goblet in hand, leaning casually to the side, an ample feast spread before him. When he caught sight of Lysander, his smooth, seductive smile cracked.

Nobody dared block Lysander's path. He wasn't sure what he'd have done to them if they had. He stopped beside the table, reeking and blood-soaked, breathing hard through his nose. *Get a good look, brother.* And his brother did, guarding any reaction from his face, but his stillness was enough. Akiem saw him. The real him: the beast years of mental torture had made.

Lysander gripped Mirann's deadweight and dumped her body on the table, sending plates of food toppling. Her arms flopped out, broken fingers falling open near Akiem's lap.

"You think you can get rid of me that easily, *brother*?" He peeled his lips back from his teeth and stoked the growl to life. Mirann's poison still burned through his veins, but so did the imminent shift, mixing into a white-hot, all-consuming power. He was more than this human camouflage, more than the dragon contained within. In that moment, he could almost reach out, capture the sun in his hands, and swallow it. For the first time in his life, he was the one in control.

Satisfied Akiem wasn't going to do a damn thing, Lysander turned to regard the room. Hundreds of his kin stared back. Their collective fear tingled on his tongue. Spreading his arms, he let them get a good look at their blood-and shit-covered prince. They'd always reveled in his failures before, so why not his victory too?

"If any of you fuckers so much as thinks of challenging me, I'll do to you what I did to this bronze bitch." His voice echoed through the hall, filling the gaping quiet. "Look at me wrong, and I'll rip your gods-b damned wings off and eat them."

"Is she dead?" Akiem finally spoke, drawing Lysander's heavy gaze back to him.

Lysander's muscles twitched, the dragon within stretching its claws. "Afraid of the bronze response?"

His brother's cheek fluttered. Still leaning to the side, he rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, thinking.

Oh, he was afraid all right. Lysander had just started the war Akiem and their mother before him had tried to avoid. *War.* Lysander fucking wanted it. He wouldn't rest until every last bronze was ripped from the earth. And then he'd start on the amethyst, and every other dragon who dared stand in his way.

Grabbing Mirann's smooth, hairless head, he leaned in, held his brother's glare, and licked up the bitch's neck, tasting coppery blood. It dribbled from his tongue. He wiped her blood across his chin. The heat of Akiem's gaze didn't wane. Lysander's message was clear. *Don't underestimate me, brother.*

Lysander planted a boot on the bench and climbed onto the table. The eyes of the amethyst elite were all on him. Leaders of the flights he'd trained and led in battle against the dragons of the north, dragons he'd once called friend. They'd quickly abandoned him once Elisandra made her intentions clear, but she was gone and Lysander was not. He grinned and threw his arms up. "The bronze bitch suffers for crossing amethyst!"

Thunderous cheers erupted, bloodlust alive in his kins' eyes.

Hopping down, he threw a smile at Akiem's guarded face. "Our flights were always mine."

His brother lunged across the table and snatched Lysander's wrist. "*Kneel to me now.*"

Right, because they needed to see Lysander follow Akiem like a good little kit. Lysander plucked his brother's grip free, leaving smears of blood on Akiem's smooth fingers. "Help me kill every fucking bronze alive and I'll kneel. For now," he replied.

Akiem glanced at those around him, their loyalty only as strong as the strongest dragon in the room. He could shift and throw down here, but to do so would be a sign of weakness. Akiem had his pride. He nodded tightly, enough for only Lysander to see.

Lysander lifted Akiem's hand, addressing the frenzy of dragons. "Your king!" Kneeling on the bench, he bowed his head, listening as the cheers rolled on and on.

A shudder tracked through him. Mirann's body blurred in his vision. Fighting off the waves of weakness, he caught Mirann's wrists and tugged, sliding her cooling carcass off the table and onto the floor. "Lowers, she's yours."

He abandoned the body as the lowers rushed in like a pack of starved wolves and shoved through the crowd, letting their grasping hands slide over his arms, smearing Mirann's blood. "You..." he barked at a stunned lower about to leave the hall. "A bath, my chamber. Now." The server hurried off.

Lysander made it a few more steps before stumbling against a wall outside the hall. His vision tipped, doubling. The power, the drug, the abuse, all of it conspired to drop him to his knees. He shoved forward, forcing his feet to move. Just another step and another. He could do this. He just had to hold himself together until he reached his chamber. The shudders were back, shaking his hands, then the sickness flushed waves of hot and cold across his skin.

For once he was grateful for his chamber's cold darkness.

At the window, he fumbled with the latch and threw it open, freezing in the blast of cold, fresh air washing in and over him.

Don't let them break you.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes, trying to keep his guts from heaving and his mind from splintering apart. He was afraid, he realized. Not of them, not of Mirann or the drug or his brother and maybe not even afraid of Dokul, not anymore. Nothing back there could hurt him.

He was afraid of himself and what he was becoming—what he needed to become to survive the war to come.

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CHAPTER 39



Eroan

“THE AMETHYST ARE MORE active now than we’ve ever seen them,” Eroan said, addressing the forty assassins gathered around Cheen’s meeting table. After sending messengers to nearby settlements with a call to arms, more assassins were arriving daily. The Order ranks had swollen to the point where they’d outgrown the Order hall and had adopted the main village hall. Although many of the faces here were young, they were each capable dragon-killers, many with double-digit kills to their names. “While they seem to be focusing on patrols, I’m not convinced they’ve forgotten us or what happened at the estuary a month ago. We must ready our forces. We cannot afford to wait. Waiting costs lives. It’s time to act.”

Cheen’s messenger entered the hall, fresh from the journey by the ragged look about him. He strode straight to Eroan at the table’s head and dug out a note from inside his coat.

“Trey,” Eroan greeted, taking the note. The male’s fingers brushed his and Eroan caught the long look in his eyes. “Will you see me after this meeting?” Eroan asked, breaking the wax seal on the note.

“Of course.”

“Rest first...” Eroan’s order trailed off as he read the scrawled words.

2 days
Chloe

The humans had answered his call. Eroan's heart stuttered. He closed the note and regarded the assassins watching him, waiting for his word. Seraph was here, waiting as patiently as the others, and Nye at the far end of the table.

With his dying breaths, Curan had told him to lead them, and that was exactly what he was going to do. "Trey, how are you with dragonblades?"

"I... er..." He cleared his throat and skipped his gaze over the gathered assassins. "I get by."

"Speak with Nye. I need you in the Order. Events are moving fast and we need more numbers."

Trey blinked and cleared his throat. "I'm a better messenger than I am an assassin."

A smile tried to pull on his lips. "Let's see if Nye can change that."

Trey was a good messenger, but for Trey to survive the long treks from village to village alone, he did more than just get by with a blade.

Nye would see what the messenger was made of.

"Appoint your successor and tell them to come find me. I need to get a message to Ashford. The rest of you..." He eyed the assassins in turn, pride swelling his heart. "When you're not patrolling, you're training. More blades are being shaped and Janna is working on teeth-tipped arrows and quivers for all of you."

"Do you have a plan for assaulting the tower?" Nye asked.

"I'm working on it."

He dismissed the group and pulled Trey to one side outside the hall. Village life bustled around them, startling normalcy in the spring sunshine. "I know you don't want this, but I need strong, capable individuals in the Order."

"Is that the only place you need me?" the messenger drawled. Oh, Eroan hadn't forgotten anything about Trey's *other* talents and could happily lose himself in the promises Trey's sultry eyes suggested. Given the half-lidded look on Trey's face, he wouldn't object if they decided to make some more memories just like the ones from a few years ago. Before Lysander, Eroan would have been tempted.

“This isn’t personal,” Eroan said, nipping his own wandering thoughts in the bud. “I need people like you for the assault on the tower.”

Trey’s lazy smile faded. “I know. I have nothing but respect for you and everything you’ve done for Cheen. I’d be honored to pick up a blade and fight alongside you.”

“Thank you.” He squeezed the male’s shoulder. “Go see Nye when you’re ready, but be warned, he won’t go easy on you.”

Trey chuckled. “I’d expect nothing less from the Order.”

Events were in motion, but a small seed of doubt had Eroan wondering if things were moving too quickly. Humans working with elves? It hadn’t happened in generations, and with good reason. But the past was dead. They had to look to the future. Curan wanted Eroan to lead, and this was how it would be done.

At his hut, he changed into darker camouflaged leathers, snatched up his blade and spyglass, and headed out while the sun was still high in the sky. The path he took was one he could walk with his eyes closed. He’d trekked it so many times during the past few weeks that he’d trampled the brush underfoot.

The land climbed and the trees thinned until he emerged at the very edge of the forest where fallen trees marked the boundary with the barrenlands. Tucking himself into his usual nook between two fallen trees, he lifted the spyglass and watched the tower far in the distance. It was still too far away for him to pick up any detail, but he’d seen enough to recognize various patterns in the flights coming and going from the tower grounds.

Setting the spyglass down, he picked up the little shaped piece of wood and whittling knife from where he stashed them daily, and began to carve, occasionally looking up when any dragon calls sailed across the land to see them spiraling higher and higher above their land.

The sun was getting low when he heard the soft press of weight against earth from the tree line behind him. “Seraph...” he said.

“Every time,” she grumbled then crouched on the other side of the trunk to his right. “How do you hear me?”

“I don’t have half an ear missing.”

Scowling, she playfully flicked his ear, the one holding her stud earring. “Be nice.”

He chuckled and handed her the spyglass.

“Any change in them?” She took a look through the glass, as she did every time since the first day she’d followed him out there.

“No.” He chipped away at the wood. “I don’t like it.”

“I got that from the meeting.”

He huffed through his nose and took some small chips off the head of the creature he carved. Its wings still needed work, they didn’t sit quite right, and the crown needed detailing, but he’d do that last. The little dragon carving sat neatly in his palm. Tiny, really. He’d started carving it to give his hand and mind something else to focus on while watching the dragons.

“What did the note say?” Seraph asked.

“Human reinforcements are close.”

She lowered the glass. “That’s good.”

He nodded.

“Isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

She glared, trying to uproot the truth. “But something is bothering you.”

“A great many things bother me.” He set the dragon carving down and took the glass from her hands to focus again on the tower. “I need to get in there.”

“Elves that go in there don’t come out... apart from you, I guess.”

Something was terribly wrong behind those tower walls. The dragons had always flown far and wide, but lately, they’d stuck close, and more and more were taking to the skies, like they were restless. Were they building toward something? Akiem had stopped rooting out the elven villages. Why? What was he planning now? The king hadn’t forgotten the estuary.

Seraph picked moss from the rotting log. “The others think you’re coming out here to watch for any changes.”

“I am.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Horse. Shit. You’re watching for...” she lowered her voice and whispered, “Lysander.” Like the name was a dirty word. Among elves, it was. It didn’t matter how many times Eroan had argued that Lysander had nothing to do with the massacre at the estuary, only that he was caught in the middle of it, they still blamed the prince. Eroan had stopped arguing his innocence, aware of his fragile new-standing among his own kind. They would never come around to thinking a dragon was anything other than an elf-killer, but perhaps he didn’t need them to. He

needed his people united, not worrying if their leader was embroiled with the enemy.

Seraph was different, though. She knew Lysander, she understood. “There’s nothing you can do,” she said.

Eroan lowered the glass and let his head drop. If he hadn’t convinced Lysander to walk into his camp, bound by the wrists, none of that disaster at the estuary would have happened. But worse than that, the memory of the hope on Lysander’s face, like perhaps together they really could make a difference. And all Eroan had managed to do was hand him back to his brother. And he was in that tower now, right back where he started.

“I’m afraid for him, Seraph,” he admitted. “How can anyone survive what he has and not have it break them?”

She folded her arms on the ground and propped her chin on them. “If anyone can, it’s him.”

But for how long? “There must be a way to get a message inside... something. I need to know if he’s... I just need to know.” He heard the pain in his voice and didn’t care. If she didn’t know his feelings went beyond some need to do the right thing, then she hadn’t been paying attention, and Seraph had always been the most attentive in lessons.

She puffed a sigh, stirring her bangs. “You can’t let the others know how you feel.”

Curan had discovered enough to see him exiled. He’d only escaped that fate because Nye witnessed Curan’s last words. “I don’t know how I feel about him.”

“You don’t?” She snorted. “Typical. *Eroan Ilanea. Can’t see what’s right in front of him.*”

“Remind me again why I like you.”

“Because I’m the second most bad-ass elf in Cheen.” She preened.

“Nye might disagree.”

She laughed and went back to thinking. In truth, he was terrified of the insatiable need to be near Lysander. He wasn’t even sure when it had gotten its claws into him or if it was even real. It felt real. It felt right, this strange, primal desire to protect the prince. After he’d saved him from the bronze and felt the male’s trembling, locked in his arms, that’s when he’d known for certain—that he’d do anything to keep Lysander safe. Alumn would be ashamed of him. What kind of elf sacrificed everything for a dragon? These strange feelings for Lysander made no sense, they broke all the rules, and

still Eroan couldn't stop the swell of his heart when he recalled their last kiss in the food-store. Lysander so willing and open, so completely vulnerable.

"No elf can get in that tower and live," Seraph was saying. "Anything bigger than a bird they eat, especially elves."

Eroan looked up at the birds sailing through pale-blue skies, unmolested by dragons. "You told me once, Janna's mate, Rowan... Ray?"

She chuckled. "Like you don't know his name! *Ross*."

"He has hawks?" he asked, thinking aloud.

Seraph arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, he does, for fishing."

"They're well trained?"

"I guess..." She followed Eroan's gaze toward the tower.

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CHAPTER 40



Lysander

HE WENT THROUGH THE MOTIONS, doubling-down on the brutality to make up for being half-dragon. Elisandra would have despised him, no matter what he became, and the hate in Akiem's eyes had solidified, becoming a visceral thing between them. Akiem was king, but Lysander had a hold of his flights, just so long as he could terrify them into submission, but with every passing night, as Akiem took to the skies, Lysander could only watch on, destined never to be among them, or among anyone. Loneliness clawed at him. And in that loneliness his mind began to tear itself apart.

As the tower shook with dragon roars, Lysander descended to the kitchens, discovering Carline seated at the window, gazing through filthy glass.

"I wondered when you might come to me, kit." She brushed away the creases in her apron. "I hear you dealt with the bronze."

Her warm tone belied the edge of ice beneath. She had never approved of Elisandra's methods, and now those methods were Lysander's. Her disappointment was so thick, he could almost taste it.

"Mirann lives," he said. "They have her in the lower nest, likely doing to her what the bronze chief did to me." He wandered about the room, not really seeing much of anything, his mind a black and hungry place. "I used to wonder sometimes if Elisandra was once good like Amalia was good.

Now I know Mother always had the darkness in her, rotting her from the inside out. When the humans fired their monstrous weapon on our ancestors and the killing dust rained from the skies, that poison twisted the great metals into us... Made us all... *wrong.*" *I have that broken root in me too, a thing all twisted and foul, that is not meant to exist.* "I fought so long to keep it at bay... I'm not fighting anymore."

The old dragon sighed. "This wasn't how it was supposed to be."

She'd said that before. Many times. The same nonsense she'd been spouting for years. "How are things supposed to be exactly?"

He knew she wouldn't answer. She never had.

He approached, seeing her thick eyebrows draw together, her eyes revealing a new fear. Of him. "What's done is done." He sounded cruel, like his mother, and couldn't find it in him to care. "Carline." She dragged her gaze up to Lysander's face. "I need to fly again."

She shook her head. "Lysander—"

"Don't tell me it can't happen."

"I tried—"

"You didn't try hard enough!" He had a hand around her neck in the next second, squeezing her throat closed. She gaped, her fear so thick now he could roll in it. "It's killing me inside. You don't know what it's like."

Her eyes misted. "*I suppose.... I don't.*"

Something inside his mind jolted loose and Lysander saw the image of himself prepared to choke an old dragon, a healer, one of the few people in his life who had helped him. The shock of his own actions shoved him free. He looked at his hands, killer's hands. He'd beaten Mirann into a bloody mess. He'd have done worse if he hadn't handed her over to the lowers. He'd punished lowers, made them beg. *Own, take, bite, fuck.* Who was he? He stumbled backward against a kitchen countertop. "I'm losing my fucking mind." There were two parts to him. The old Lysander and the new. The drunken prince was gone now. This new side to him ruled with iron teeth and claws.

Carline rubbed at her neck and rose from her chair. "Losing it?" she groused. "No. You're allowing others to take it from you."

"Allowing?" He should never have come here. "I've fought them all. I'm sick of it. Sick of fighting something I can't win. So I am them now. And because I can't fly I have to be worse than them. I took..." he swallowed around the crack in his voice, "I took a whip to a lower

yesterday. I don't remember when he died, exactly, just that when it was done, I felt nothing..." He still felt nothing and that seemed wrong. Amalia would have been disgusted by him. "I need to fly again. I can't be this thing and not fly, it's turning me into Mother."

"Being able to fly again won't change your nature. Only you can do that."

But he couldn't. Not anymore. With a snarl, he headed for the door. "Nothing can change my nature, old woman. It was a mistake to come to you."

"What if there were a way for you to fly again, prince?"

He stopped in the doorway, hard fingers gripping the frame. "Suddenly you recall one?" When she didn't immediately answer, he turned. She merely blinked back at him, the picture of patience. "What way?"

"The price is high. Perhaps too high. It may cost you the one thing in this world you love."

His heart thudded harder. He'd pay it. He'd pay anything to soar again, to lead the flights, to watch the world scroll beneath his wings before he burned it all. Besides, he didn't love anything, so the price was nothing.

"Tell me."

Old knowledge flashed in Carline's eyes. "Your mother's amethyst eye."



BLINDING Elisandra in one eye had been one of his better memories. She'd punished him for weeks after, but it had been worth it. When he'd recovered, she had worn an amethyst stone in place of her flesh and blood eye. Too wrapped up in his own hurt, he hadn't thought much about it.

According to Carline, that amethyst wasn't just a pretty jewel, but it held the key to fixing his wing. And she knew where it was. Far beyond her reach, beyond the reach of anyone in the tower. But Lysander knew how to get it. And she'd been right, the price was high.

Dawn flooded light into the tower through the open window as he returned, thoughts a muddle of possibilities.

A hawk screeched at him from the foot of the bed. He hadn't seen it, so deep were his thoughts, but he could hardly miss the thing now, all red

feathers and puffed out chest. It flapped a little as he stared back at it, taunting him with its wingspan. He stepped closer and the bird shifted, turning its head to eye him with one yellow-ringed eye.

“Easy there...”

Closer, and the hawk spread its wings, making itself bigger, and there, strapped to its leg, was a tiny roll of paper. A note.

Lysander slowly eased off his jacket, held it out and inched forward. Before the bird could take flight, he threw the jacket over it. The creature turned into a squawking, flapping ball of feathers. Lysander grabbed at its taloned foot and plucked the note free, then let it up. The hawk flapped about the room before taking up residence on the back of a chair, glaring at Lysander as though trying to figure out the best way to eat him.

“You’ve got balls coming here, bird.” He broke the seal on the note. Elegant, flowing handwriting led his eye across the paper.

*Meet me?
Dusk at the fallen oak.
- Eroan*

He read it again, to be sure, then flipped the paper over, looking for the trick, the lie. The sweet smell of cut wood and pine needles drifting from the paper, soothing his thoughts, reminding him of the days he’d trekked through the woods, behind or beside Eroan, watching him carve through the undergrowth, perfectly at ease in the wilds. He knew the oak Eroan referred to, the same one they’d stopped at on the way back from the coast. The one where the wolves had ambushed Eroan.

He slid down the edge of the bed and slumped to the floor. The trek to Eroan’s village felt like so long ago. The last time he’d seen Eroan, Curan had knocked him out, and the estuary had happened.

Eroan was alive.

He was all right.

He lifted the paper to his nose and breathed in.

What if it was a trap? The thought dampened his mood. The elves would likely want to lure Lysander out. They may even have heard of his more recent reputation as Akiem’s vicious flight commander.

“Is this a trap, bird?” He, or she—he had no idea how to tell male or female hawks apart—ruffled her feathers, apparently comfortable where she

was.

The paper had Eroan's scent all over it. If it were a trap, then he was explicit in it, willingly or unwillingly. There was only one way to know.

He shoved to his feet and stopped at the window. Clouds had rolled in, but he could just make out the tree line far beyond the barrenlands. Eroan was out there, somewhere.

On horseback, he could make it to the fallen oak before nightfall.

A knock at the door announced a lower's arrival. "The dawn patrol has returned. A flight of bronze are making their way up the coast. They'll be here by sundown."

Dusk at the fallen oak. Right when the bronze would arrive. Dokul would be among them. Acid coated his tongue, chasing away the taste of bronze. He cursed. Could nothing go his way? He couldn't leave. He had to be in the tower with his flights on a long leash, had to be standing alongside amethyst when Dokul arrived, or all of this was for nothing. Revenge was in his grasp.

He screwed the note up in a trembling fist, held it over the window ledge, and let it fall.

"Sire, there's a hawk... right there."

"I'd noticed." Lysander flashed the lower a forced smile. "Breakfast."

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CHAPTER 41



Eroan

DUSK FELL EARLIER in the forest where shadows were thick and long. A few early stars began their twinkling above swaying branches and rippling leaves. Eroan lowered his gaze to the small campfire, feeling like a fool. There was a chance the hawk had been killed, or intercepted, in which case, the fallen oak note would mean nothing to anyone else. Or Lysander may not even still be in the tower, or he'd received the note and chosen not to come. There could be a thousand reasons for why Eroan found himself alone, but that last one cut the most.

And after his people had turned on them both the smart thing for Lysander to do would be *not* to come to this meeting.

It was for the best. An elf and a dragon was an impossible thing.

He stood and kicked the fire over, stamping out the remains to keep the wood from reigniting. The humans would be at Cheen soon. If he hurried now—

“Now how will we keep warm?”

Eroan had the sword out and his glare trained on the cloaked figure before recognizing the deep, gravelly voice as Lysander's. “You're late,” he chided.

Lysander skidded down the furrow, into the depression beneath the oak's upturned roots, and lowered his hood. “It's a long ride.”

Then he must have left his horse outside the camp somewhere. Eroan wondered about wolves until he saw Lysander crouch, take the firestarter from his pocket and begin to rebuild the fire. A few sparks from the firestarter and the hot wood was burning again.

Lysander looked up, seeing the query in Eroan's eyes. "I'm not shifting just to relight your puny fire, elf."

"You kept it?" Eroan asked, replacing the sword in its backsheath and shrugging it off to set it down beside the fallen oak's reaching roots. He'd recalled Lysander holding something in his hand at the creek in France, turning it over and over. He'd assumed it was a pebble. Lysander had kept the firestarter this whole time.

"It's not always convenient to turn into a thirty-thousand-pound dragon to roast some rabbit." Dry humor still underlined Lysander's voice in a tone he used to cover all the hurt.

The firestarter was more than convenience. The tool had been with them since Eroan had stolen it from the bronze. For Lysander, a dragon apt at fire, to keep it all this time... it meant something to him.

Eroan circled around the campfire, rolling up his sleeves to absorb the warmth and light. He kept Lysander in the corner of his vision. There was something different about him, a difference that had Eroan's instincts on edge. The dragon carried a new stillness, some other hardness that had stolen the light from his eyes. Eroan's heart raced. He had vowed to protect him and failed.

"If you keep looking at me like that, elf, I may act on the promise in your eyes."

Eroan's chest briefly constricted at the predatory drawl to Lysander's words. He'd been about to sit across the fire from him but now reconsidered that thought. Staying on his feet provided a quicker chance to react, if he should need to.

"The elf at the estuary... did he make it?" Lysander used a stick to poke at the fire.

"No." Eroan fought off the memory of Curan bleeding in the mud. Many elves had died that day. Many dragons too, but not enough. And not this dragon, thankfully.

"I'm sorry... I tried to stop him..." Lysander pinched the bridge of his nose, wincing at some unseen pain. "I tried to warn him. Elves are too stubborn for their own good."

“He lived long enough to speak of how wrong he was... about you.”

“He did, huh?” He continued to nurse the fire, lost in thought. “That lesson always seems to be learned too late.”

In firelight, Lysander’s face took on a new menace. Eroan searched for the glitter of humor he’d found so fascinating, or the teasing lift of his mouth, but there was none. He wanted to go to him, sit with him, listen to whatever he wanted to say and anything he didn’t, but the gnawing doubt held him standing firm on the opposite side of the fire. Even when Eroan had been in chains, there hadn’t been this gulf between them.

“Why did you ask me here?” Lysander asked.

Why had he? He had a dozen reasons he could use; for information, for a way into the tower, to know if Lysander would still help him. But more than all of those, he’d needed to know Lysander was alive and well. Lysander was alive, but clearly all was not well.

“I asked you once and I’m asking again...” he said, when Eroan had waited too long, “what is this thing between us?”

The hardness with which he asked exposed Eroan’s own fears. He brushed Lysander’s question away with one of his own. “Do you know of any disused or unguarded tunnels?”

Lysander’s mouth tilted sideways. He tossed the stick onto the fire and watched the flames twist it until it snapped. Then those dark, flame-licked eyes lifted to Eroan. “Is that all you want from me?”

No, it wasn’t all. It wasn’t even the real reason Eroan was here. “Lysander, this... us,” he sucked in a breath, “there is no place for what I want. There can’t be.”

“And what do you want?” He unclasped his cloak, shrugged it off his shoulders, dropped it to the ground and stood, stepping around the fire, bringing his shroud of darkness with him, like he was a hunter and Eroan his prey. Only Eroan had never been prey and had no intention of starting now.

Eroan stepped in, jolting Lysander to a stop, and in that moment of confusion, Eroan sank his fingers into Lysander’s hair, cupped his head and pulled him into a kiss that said everything words alone could not.

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CHAPTER 42



Lysander

INSTINCTS DEMANDED HE PUSH AWAY, but then Eroan pulled, and the elf's mouth was on his, and all Lysander could think was how warm and soft those lips were. He wanted more. So much more. His surprise, his confusion, turned into a heated need to take and own. He speared both hands into Eroan's hair, captured him completely and plundered Eroan's mouth, driving his tongue in, taking all he wanted. Lust lit him up. When Eroan arched into him, giving just as much as he received, Lysander sank his free hand down the elf's solid back and clutched him close. He was made of hard, smooth muscle, of masculine strength in a way that demanded to be stroked and kneaded and *tasted*. Lysander's fingers curled in, owning.

Eroan's warm, light hands touched the nape of Lysander's neck, holding him firmly cradled, while tangling the fingers of his other hand in his locks, tickling his face and neck.

It was everything Lysander had ached for since Elisandra had first denied him the chance to love, and this time, Eroan gave it freely.

Eroan broke away, making a deep, guttural sound low in his throat as he tilted his head back, inviting Lysander to mouth his neck. Lysander tasted Eroan's hard jawline and trailed his tongue lower to a spot that strummed Eroan, sending a jolt through him. Eroan tilted his hips, grinding his

hardness against Lysander's hip. Fuck, Eroan was undoing him from the inside out.

Lysander dropped both hands and captured the elf's hips, feeling him twitch and shift, his body a song of demands and needs that Lysander would gladly answer.

"You come alive in my hands..." Lysander breathed, setting free the words he'd so long wanted to speak. Lysander wanted nothing more than to maneuver his hand to where he knew Eroan would groan for him, but not yet. He'd been a creature who takes, and he'd hated every second of it. He wanted to give, he wanted this moment to last forever knowing it never could. "It's never been like this before..." He kissed his neck, tasting the salt and sweetness of elf. "You slay me."

Eroan pulled Lysander's head back and gently nipped at Lysander's neck. Sharp, tiny teeth pinched, sending a painful rush of heated lust right to where his cock ached. To make it worse, or better, Eroan shoved, driving him back against the fallen oak's towering roots. Something sharp and awkward nudged him in the lower back. "Ah, fuck..."

Eroan laughed that wickedly seductive chuckle of his. Lysander hooked his leg around Eroan's, and pulled, dropping the elf—still laughing—in the dirt. "You think this is amusing?" He straddled his thighs, planted his hand right over Eroan's bulging crotch, and watched lust flash a warning in the elf's eyes. Eroan's breath shortened. His smile turned serious and it was all Lysander could do not to act on the rabid desires to *take* this impossible creature. He brushed his rough cheek against Eroan's smooth jaw, filling his head with the smell of elf, prompting an automatic rumble low in his throat.

Eroan jerked beneath him. The laughter was back in his beautiful eyes. "This really isn't funny."

"Dragons *purr*."

Lysander brushed his forehead against Eroan's, losing himself in the fine lines and long lashes of Eroan's eyes. "Only with you." Eroan's brow pinched and Lysander feared he'd said too much, but then the elf hooked his arms around his neck and pulled him down, arching beneath him, to rise and meet Lysander's chest with his own. Eroan's hand dropped down Lysander's back, seeking his ass, and squeezed, pulling down at the same time so Lysander's cock crushed against Eroan's hip.

A gasp betrayed Lysander's fraying control and Eroan's warm, rough hands found their way beneath his jacket. Skin on skin, on his lower back,

set off an array of delicious tingling that made him wish they could go somewhere safe, somewhere warm, and lose himself in the naked feel of Eroan moving beneath his hands, stretch out beneath his body. “Do elves purr?”

“Want to find out?”

He wanted too many things and all of them now. He tore at Eroan’s jacket, flicking open the fasteners, and Eroan’s wet mouth was on his neck again, at the point that rattled his nerves, sending them into freefall in a way that felt so fucking right.

“You like that?” Eroan whispered, meeting Lysander’s gaze. With low lashes and bright eyes, Lysander forgot the question as he admired the marvel of Eroan, the line of his nose and sumptuous, take-me mouth. His mass of near-white hair pillowed behind his head, strewn with twigs and leaves. How had he resisted him this long? The truth was, he hadn’t. He’d wanted him since he’d first lain eyes on the dragon-killer who’d come to kill the queen.

“You free me, Eroan Ilanea.” He bit at Eroan’s lower lip, teasing the softness between his teeth as he broke open the jacket and eased his hand up beneath Eroan’s shirt, dancing his fingers over the hard, lean ridges of muscle, feeling smooth scar tissue beneath his fingertips. Eroan sucked in, and Lysander dropped his hand to the plane of Eroan’s stomach until he brushed that light trail of silken hair farther down, to the heat below Eroan’s belt.

He flicked his eyes up and eased himself lower, brushing the bunched shirt at Eroan’s chest, feeling and hearing Eroan’s panting beneath him.

A little voice at the back of his mind told him he had somewhere else to be, a war to fight, questions to ask, that he had to be *someone* else, but he cared more for the male spread beneath him than any war or mission.

Unlacing Eroan’s fly, he worked the male’s cock from the undergarments and closed his fingers around the impressive swollen shaft, his own restrained arousal throbbing with want, and shifted down enough to hold Eroan’s cock firmly at the base and flick his tongue over the flushed head. Eroan’s sharp little teeth came down on his own lower lip, and his eyes fell closed, surrendering to Lysander’s mouth. Obliging, Lysander took him in deep, rubbing the smooth head against the roof of his mouth, and this time there was no Mother leaning over him, no ropes holding Eroan

down, and no audience to watch. Eroan's sweetness laced his throat. He took more, before withdrawing and sliding his fingers in a building rhythm.

"You taste so fucking good, elf."

Eroan's abs stuttered, pulling in, and Lysander imagined his pleasure tightening low in his back, through the base of his balls and shaft. He felt his own tight pressure riding higher. By diamonds, he'd dreamed this so often he could hardly believe it was happening.

Eroan's hips twitched and a small groan rumbled through him. "Alumn," he groaned, eyes fluttering open. That gaze fixed on Lysander with unwavering intent. Lysander's withered and broken heart swelled. He could allow himself this one blissful moment knowing it would likely be his last.

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CHAPTER 43



E_{roan}

EROAN FELL into the feel and taste of dragon. The male's hand on the most personal part of him, his mouth on his exposed hip, roaming and teasing as he pulled Eroan's trousers lower. He was falling and losing his mind at the same time, giving himself up to the beast. He'd never surrendered, not to anyone. Until now. Falling had never felt so good.

When his gaze locked with Lysander's, the raw, heated look in the male's eyes ignited his own savage desires and when Lysander next went down on him, Eroan threw his legs up, locking Lysander's shoulders between his thighs and rolled, flipping the dragon onto his back with Eroan above him, pinned at the chest. Eroan attacked, throwing himself into a kiss that distracted Lysander enough for Eroan to pull open his shirt where he'd wanted to with his hands since admiring Lysander's unconscious body all those weeks ago. The dragon purred again, and something told Eroan his sound of contentment was a rare one.

Eroan planted both hands on Lysander's bare chest and pushed up. The racing *thud-thud* of Lysander's heart warmed his palm. Lysander's sultry look promised all the wicked desires Eroan's mind could think of. He leaned over him, pinning him beneath him. Eroan's hair, now free of its band, fell over one shoulder and trailed finger-like over Lysander's pectoral muscle, making it twitch. Eroan kept his eyes up and ran the wet tip of his

tongue along the hard ridge of that muscle, then roamed it lower to flick the nipple. Lysander's hand shot into his hair. His hips jerked and Eroan gripped the offered cock, capturing Lysander's gasp in his mouth.

He was everything an elf was not. Pure, restrained strength. Power, dammed behind a wall of muscle and control. Eroan strummed the hot, writhing body, plucking apart all Lysander's restraints, revealing the truth behind.

For a moment, Eroan simply stared at the terrible, wonderful male. A creature so foreign and dangerous that Eroan could not hope to fully capture all of him. But he could try. "Will you come for me, dragon?"

The purr became a growl, fraught with want. Eroan nipped at Lysander's ear, freeing a cascade of shivers through Lysander, pinned and writhing beneath him. To have this devastating creature at his mercy teased all the dark thoughts and wants from the corners of his mind. Eroan ached to mindlessly taste and explore this complicated treasure, to whittle away the hours beneath the stars until there was no inch of him left unexplored. If it was a madness, then let him be insane, because nothing had ever felt so right as this.

Eroan listened to Lysander's shortening breaths, caressed Lysander's hard arousal until the breaths became ragged, and switched to a faster pace, bringing Lysander to the very edge, where his entire body trembled with need. Moonlight spilled through the trees, glistening on Lysander's shuddering chest and catching in his dark eyes. Eroan drank in the sinful sight and brought the dragon to the final moment. His back arched, mouth opening. Eroan dropped his head and tongued a line down Lysander's cock.

Lysander bucked. "Fuck." He growled out a wrangled cry, his seed spurting into the hollow of his stomach in three shuddering spasms. Eroan swept his tongue through the thick, salty wetness, and gently milked the last few sensitive strokes from Lysander's cock, making the dragon jerk and hiss.

"Fucking diamonds, elf." Voice gruff and breathless, Lysander roughly grabbed at Eroan's shoulder and pulled. Eroan met the fiery kiss with an insatiable one of his own, tasting Lysander's seed on his tongue. Lysander's warm, tingling fingers found Eroan's neglected erection. Eroan jerked into Lysander's hand, clasping the dragon against him, leaving only enough room for Lysander's hand to caress and stroke as the kiss turned hard and demanding.

Somewhere in all the mindless lust, he lost all sense of where he ended and Lysander began, and became a thing of raw need, hips thrusting, fucking Lysander's tight grip until he lost himself to the racing pleasure and came so hard, he sank his teeth into the male's shoulder to keep from crying out.

Blissful shudders spilled through him.

Lysander mouthed at his neck and jaw. "I am nowhere near done with you," the dragon growled.

Eroan smiled into Lysander's shoulder. He had a hundred places his people needed him to be, a thousand responsibilities on his back, but none called to him like this precious moment and the moments to come.



THE RATTLE of a woodpecker deep in the forest brought Eroan around from the warm, contented sleep he'd been cradled in. A heavy leg lay hooked over his, the thigh warm but hard and positioned as though to claim Eroan from behind. A smile eased onto Eroan's lips. Lysander had thrown his cloak over them both sometime in the night, keeping out the morning chill, and the mossy earth beneath them made a fine bed. Eroan's trousers hung around an ankle, trapped by one remaining boot, and his shirt had bunched low down his arms and back. He was a mess of twisted fabric, leaves, twigs, and the rich smell of sex and dragon, and he couldn't think of anywhere else he'd rather be. Despite there being many places he *should* be. With no word from him, the Order would start looking. If he left now and traveled fast he'd be back by nightfall. It would be the sensible and responsible thing to do.

He didn't move.

The raw way Lysander had looked at him last night? He couldn't leave him while he slept, not even for the Order or the barrage of questions he'd get on his return. Lysander had probably seen the same desperation in Eroan. He must have certainly felt it in their touches.

What is this thing between us?

It was a dangerous question, one Lysander kept asking and one Eroan was too afraid to answer.

The woodpecker rattled again. Lysander stirred against Eroan's back. With his shirt wrenched down, Lysander's rough chin grazed Eroan's shoulder, making him shiver. Old scars tingled. Lysander's fingers touched the raised welts and Eroan hissed in a shuddering breath. "*Alumn...*" It hadn't hurt, his skin had been too damaged to feel much of anything, but he wasn't used to having anyone linger on those marks.

"I didn't want to do this," Lysander whispered. "Had it been any other, they'd have killed you."

Eroan pulled his mind from the dark memories. "I know."

A soft kiss settled on Eroan's shoulder. Lysander trailed his fingers lower, over Eroan's hip, sparking off tight little flutters low in Eroan's belly. "Tell me of your goddess, *Alumn*," Lysander whispered.

"*Alumn*?" Eroan sighed and let his attention pool exactly where Lysander's curiously gentle fingers roamed inward. But, instead of venturing around his hip, to where Eroan's arousal was hardening, he stroked his fingertips back up, along Eroan's waist. "She is the light that feeds us, the hand that guides us. She is in the hearts of us all."

"Even dragons?" he asked.

Before Lysander, he would have said no. "Perhaps."

Lysander's touch danced over Eroan's shoulder and down his arm again, reigniting delightful sparks of lust. Eroan shivered, his skin suddenly sensitive. Lysander's dry chuckle rumbled. Those wandering fingertips roamed back up again to the nape of his neck, where they gathered Eroan's hair back, making room for the soft warmth of Lysander's mouth. His wet tongue probed just below Eroan's ear, at his jaw.

Eroan leaned back and fluttered his eyes closed. The open kiss became hungry and the firm press of Lysander's arousal nudged at Eroan's hip.

Eroan had learned how Lysander knew exactly how to disarm with his mouth and tongue, and how he used the rest of his shockingly seductive body to empty Eroan of every thought, leaving just the feel of a dragon worshipping every inch of him.

"I'll never forget how you saved me from the bronze nest..." Lysander whispered, breaths hot on Eroan's neck. "And the hours after. In the dark. In the ground."

Neither would Eroan. He'd been afraid Lysander would shift and crush him, afraid a bronze would find them, afraid of so much, and the only thing

he could do to stop it all was hold Lysander and pray Alumn would spare them.

Had Lysander ever been loved? He couldn't imagine such a thing as love existed among dragons. Would the prince recognize love should he be given it?

"You never gave up on me," Lysander whispered, clutching Eroan's hip and pulling, giving him an anchor to grind his erection against Eroan's back.

"I never will." Nothing had felt truer.

Lysander stilled. His stroking touches vanished. The cloak shifted and Lysander's warmth disappeared.

Eroan looked behind him at the sight of the dragon in dawnlight. His skin was much darker than most elves, and where the light lapped at his abdominal muscles, Eroan readily remembered mouthing those molded ripples, making Lysander's breath hitch.

His shirt hung loose as he hitched up his trousers, over his hips. Then he went hunting the camp for his belt. Eroan figured he could watch him all day. Dappled sunlight touched small elf-bites on his toned arms and firm shoulders. Lysander noticed one of those bites on his forearm, his mouth teasing into a smile. "Dragon bites never felt as good as yours."

He considered pulling Lysander back down and deliberately losing himself in him again, just for a few more hours. The world and its war could wait. But he'd already been gone too long and the last thing they needed was a pride of elves stumbling upon them together.

Eroan tossed the cloak off and shrugged his shirt back over his shoulders, leaving the laces hanging loose. Where Lysander's mouth had scorched him, the remaining tingling sensations made his skin fizzle. Lysander had a true healer's touch. Eroan had known it, but after last night, he'd felt its evidence. Magic moved beneath the male's hands. There was magic in him now, even as human. That lemony twang, the one that added a kick whenever he'd nipped at Lysander's back and shoulders. *Alumn*, Lysander was like a drug, like something forbidden. Eroan's body tingled, coming alive just thinking about tasting him again. He needed that dragon with him for longer, much longer. A night was not enough. But such things were impossible.

He dressed, distracting himself with raking his fingers through his hair, freeing leaves and twigs, then rummaged through the pockets of his coat for

the wooden carving. They would part ways soon. This might be his only chance to give it to him. Eroan clutched the small wooden dragon in his hand, lingering in uncertainty, until Lysander approached, throwing his dark cloak around his shoulders, readying to leave.

There wouldn't be better time.

He pulled a leather lace from his shirt, tied it around the dragon carving, making a necklace, and offered it to Lysander.

"What is it?" Lysander asked.

"A gift."

"Gift?" His face darkened, which hadn't been the reaction Eroan had expected. "What for?"

He took Lysander's hand and dropped the necklace into it, then folded his rough fingers around the carving.

"I have this," he touched Seraph's earring in his ear, "from a friend, to remind me I'm not alone. Now you have that." Eroan released his hand and concentrated on fastening his coat with Lysander beside him, looking down at the necklace in his hand like it might come alive and bite him. "It's an elven custom to give parting gifts—"

An odd look of horror came over the dragon's face.

"It's freely given," Eroan explained. Had this been a mistake? He hadn't meant to distress him. Had nobody given him a gift before? It hadn't even crossed his mind that something so small would cause Lysander pain.

He swallowed and bundled his hair back in a band, giving his hands something to do.

"You carved this?" Lysander asked, face pained.

Eroan nodded. His chest tightened. He regretted giving it. "If you don't want it—"

"I can't take this." Lysander held it out at arm's length, mouth twisted as though disgusted.

"Keep it," Eroan said. "It's no good for anyone else."

"You don't understand..." Lysander backed off, stumbling in his haste. "Why are *you* like this?"

Like what? Where was this coming from? Why was a gift so wrong a thing to give? Something had triggered Lysander. The gift, or something else? "I... didn't mean for it to hurt you. A gift is a good thing."

Lysander dropped the necklace into a pocket, whirled on his heel, snatched Eroan's sword from its place by the oak's roots, and pulled it free

of its scabbard, all in one, swift moment. A panicked, wild look crossed his face.

“Wait...” Eroan lifted his hands. What was happening here? “What is this?” Lysander bore down on him and Eroan backed up, boots snagging in tree root.

“This...” Lysander hissed. “This is necessary.”

Eroan planted his boots. This could only be a misunderstanding, something that could be remedied. “I meant no offense. It’s just a small gift. It means nothing—”

“Good, because all of this...” Lysander gestured wildly at the camp. “All of this means nothing.” His teeth flashed as he spoke, the words bubbling with fury.

The concern Eroan had felt the previous evening returned. The same darkness he’d sensed then lurked behind Lysander’s eyes now.

“Where’s the amethyst stone, Eroan?” he snarled.

Eroan’s thoughts stuttered, tripping over his heart. This male bearing down on him now was not the same male he had spent the entire night with. The sudden switch in behavior scattered Eroan’s instincts, numbing him inside. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t? Let me spell it out for you, *elf*. The night I killed the queen, you took something from her chamber, something that belongs to amethyst—belongs to me. I need it back.” Lysander pushed forward, driving Eroan against a tree.

The dragonblade tip dug in, just above the pulse point in his neck. He could taste the beat of his own heart. “I took the swords.” The sword tip pricked, burning.

“My brother doesn’t have it. He searched that tower high and low. The only other soul who could have taken it is you.”

Then Lysander coming here, and last night, it was lies? Eroan lowered his hands, narrowing his eyes. A cool, sharp chill filtered through his veins, encasing his heart in ice. “That’s why you came?”

Lysander laughed. “What, did you think I came to kindle some doomed romance with a fucking elf?” The cruelty in Lysander’s laugh almost matched that in his eyes. “You trust too easily, Eroan Ilanea. Tell me where you have the stone and I won’t return to your village and burn it down to its foundations. I spent long enough there to find it again... All I have to do is follow the stench of elf.”

That same elven tale of the scorpion and fox crossed Eroan's mind. One having trusted the other, and both dying because of it. Lysander was the scorpion, after all. "Don't threaten my people." Eroan's lips quivered around a snarl. "Whatever this is, I know you. *This* is not you."

Lysander was on him suddenly, the blade crushed between them, Lysander's weight a solid wall of muscle. Only this time the look in his eyes was one of cold-blooded murder. He grabbed Eroan's jacket in a fist. "You have no fucking idea what I've done or what I'll do. You took the amethyst eye. I need it back."

They'd broken him, Eroan realized. The worst had happened and now he was the monster Lysander had tried so hard to fight. He'd been so strong, but that was before Eroan's people had handed him back to his brother, before Eroan had failed him. Something terrible had happened after the estuary, something he could not fight. "Lysander, what did they do to you?"

He pulled and slammed Eroan back. Pain cracked up Eroan's skull. He cried out and hissed through his teeth. "I lost the amethyst when Akiem burned my village. It's gone."

The backhanded blow burst a flash of stinging heat across Eroan's face. Shock more than pain momentarily stunned him. Then Lysander's grip closed around his throat. "Don't lie to me, bitch."

He pulled his lips back, baring his teeth while slamming internal barriers down to guard his heart. "You let them win after everything you've fought for?"

"I didn't *let* them do anything." Fire spilled into Lysander's eyes. "Tell me where it is or your precious new home burns."

There was nothing of the Lysander he knew in him now, and maybe there hadn't been since last night. Bitter failure burned Eroan's throat. Lysander's failure to hold back the dark, and his own for promising to keep him safe and failing. He swallowed. "I'll bring it to you."

Between one blink and the next, between assuming Eroan had taken the stone and knowing it for certain, the hurt showed in Lysander's eyes.

Eroan had betrayed him.

"I found it," Eroan admitted. "When she fell, it fell too." He recalled the glint of purple stone under the queen's bed, remembered the wrong feel of it in his hand and how it had chilled the blood in his veins. "I took it, and after your brother burned my home, I went back and retrieved it from the ashes."

Lysander's grip loosened. He let go and backed away. Eroan dabbed at the sword's bite on his neck. "I'll bring it to you."

"No," Lysander said. "We go now and you take me right to it. No tricks."

"If you walk into Cheen, the Order will kill you."

"And I'm supposed to believe an elf like you doesn't have his secret ways in and out?"

Eroan watched Lysander become cold, become something else—someone else. Someone with no choice but to become what he despised. But Lysander was in there. Last night had been proof of that. "It doesn't have to be this way."

"In your world, perhaps not. But in my world, there is no other way."

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CHAPTER 44



Lysander

HATE. Disgust. Betrayal. These things knotted in Lysander's gut, twisting and tightening, trying to choke him. He didn't deserve Eroan's gift, not before, and definitely not now. He needed that gem. It would change everything. He needed it so he could stop the bronze, stop all of them, and what he felt for Eroan... That all-consuming need to be with him, to taste him, feel him, to have his arms around him... When Carline had warned him that he'd need to find Eroan again, he hadn't expected this to feel so wrong. Hadn't expected to feel at all. He'd stopped feeling much of anything. But now none of his physical wounds had hurt this bad—the loss of Eroan was the terrible price to fly again, to be free, to destroy the bronze, but it was a price he had to pay. With both wings, and with a new reputation, he'd finally do more than just survive. He'd thrive.

"Keep walking, elf." He jabbed Eroan in the back, pushing him onward.

The march through the trees went on and on. He hadn't wanted this, but it was the only way. This thing between them, this push and pull, it would get Eroan killed, either by dragons or by Eroan's own people. He was too bright a thing to die for Lysander. This way, Eroan survived. He'd hate him, but he'd live, and go on with his life, destined to be the infamous dragon-killer. The hurt Lysander saw in Eroan's eyes when he'd turned on him, that

hurt was a gift too, it would fuel Eroan. Make him a better killer, a better leader.

By now the bronze would be at the tower. War may have already begun. Lysander's absence would be noted. He needed his mother's gem. That was the only thing that mattered now.

"Hurry." Another jab in the back.

"I should kill you for this," Eroan snarled.

Lysander laughed to cover the hollow feeling those words opened. "You already tried once." The words tasted like ash. Everything tasted like ash on his tongue. The memories of last night had burned up in the self-hate now fueling every step. He was dragon. This was what was expected of him, and if he played it to the end, he'd make it count and bring the entire dragonlands down around him. And all it cost him was the only person who ever understood him. *The price is high.*

They trekked along the same path Lysander had willingly taken with Eroan back to his village before. He watched the elf's back, watched his steady gait through the brush. Lysander was under no illusion, he'd made a powerful enemy in Eroan. But if that was his legacy, so be it. Eroan had been right, this thing between them could not happen.

"You don't need to do this," Eroan said.

"You have no idea what I need."

"I know what you're doing, pushing me away. You believe you're not worthy. I'll not play your game."

"My life is no game."

"Had you just asked—"

"You'd have handed the gem over?" Not a chance, Eroan was too wily for that. "The eye belongs to amethysts. You stole it. I told you before, we do not suffer thieves."

The elf's ears ticked at the familiar words. He stopped on the path and turned his head a little just enough to catch Lysander with a scathing look, then he crouched low, waving Lysander down to a crouch and out of sight. "Patrol."

Lysander knelt and listened, hearing nothing but the breeze. Eroan knew the gem was worth more than it appeared, else he wouldn't have bothered with it. He'd seen the queen wearing it, maybe even wondered how she was able to rule and if the gem had anything to do with the strength of her reign.

The elf was too sharp to let something of power slip through his fingers. He'd figured it out before Lysander had.

Lysander admired that sharp mind of his. Admired more than that, like the way he was poised now, on the cusp of fighting back, about to pick his moment to strike.

Lysander slid the sword's edge up the back of Eroan's coat, denting the leather. "Easy now, and everyone gets to live."

"Was any of last night real?" Eroan whispered, keeping his face turned toward the trees.

All of it. Every touch, every kiss, every delicious taste. Even now, Lysander's body sang with all the ways he wanted Eroan. The dozens of tiny elven bites hummed, each one a reminder of where Eroan's mouth had marked him, *owned* him. His cock semi-hardened from the memory. But last night had been about more than sex. In Eroan's arms, he truly felt safe. Eroan alone had the power to chase the wrongs and the hurts away. And Lysander had ruined it all. But he'd save the elf again. One last time. Save him from Lysander.

He leaned in, his mouth close to Eroan's neck, like it had been last night, when he'd kissed him there, made him groan Lysander's name. "You were the sweetest one-night fuck I've ever had." Eroan's cheek fluttered. Lysander's heart cracked. "We're keeping elves alive today, remember. Get in, get me the gem, and none of your kin gets hurt."

Eroan led him around the outskirts of the village, staying far away from the palisades to avoid the eagle-eyed elves watching the walls, and in through a dense line of undergrowth to a hut that had that same cut pine smell Lysander associated with Eroan.

Lysander kept Eroan in sight and kicked the hut door closed behind him. The place was small, a chair, fireplace, table, a bed at the back, an out-of-place trail of metal pipes running across the ceiling beams.

A flicker in his vision. He lunged to the side to the sound of a dagger thrumming in wood and then Eroan slammed against him, plowing him into the wall. "*I never miss!*" The right hook split the inside of Lysander's cheek, spilling blood onto his tongue. He backed up, hit a wall, threw his arm up to block another vicious-looking dagger from slashing across his throat and retaliated with a low left punch, striking Eroan in his gut. The elf grunted, slashed. Lysander caught his wrist and twisted his arm around, almost popping it from the shoulder socket. Eroan barked a cry. Lysander

kicked him forward, against the table, still clutching the dragonblade sword in his right hand—deliberately unused, he did not want to hurt him.

He pinned a hand between Eroan's shoulders, shoving him down onto the tabletop, Eroan's ass angled against his groin. "Don't piss me off." Eroan bucked. Lysander dropped the sword with a clatter and caught Eroan's other failing arm at the wrist, trapping both at the wrists at Eroan's lower back.

He had the elf pinned and still he fought. Wild darts of lust plucked on Lysander's beastly instincts, pooling molten heat through his cock. Eroan's struggles only served to wind him tighter.

"I need you to stop fighting me," he hissed, words from a part of his past, a part that tried to dig in and demand he stop this now. "Or you won't like where this goes." But if this did happen, there would be no going back. *Save him from me and my world.*

Eroan calmed, face turned to one side so he could pin those hate-filled eyes on Lysander. Only, the glare wasn't as vicious as Lysander expected. Despite Eroan showing his teeth, his muscles straining against Lysander's hold, the sharp challenge in his eyes steered Lysander's thoughts far off course. Eroan liked to fight, in life, and in love. And now Lysander had him trapped beneath him, the rules of the game had changed.

He tightened his fingers around Eroan's wrists, warm skin against warm skin, and purred, "Or maybe you will like where this goes?"

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CHAPTER 45



Eroan

THE KILLING RUSH sped through his veins, setting his blood alight. The things Lysander had said cut him to the bone, but even now, the feel of Lysander's weight against the backs of his thighs re-stitched the part of his brain that told him this was wrong and made it feel right. Teeth gritted, hands wrenched behind him, shame tried to dampen the lust. Then Lysander deliberately canted his hips, shifting just enough that Lysander's hardened length shoved against his ass.

"You had your chance to fuck me," Eroan snapped. "You'll not get another."

Lysander pulled Eroan's hip closer and thrust a hand around Eroan's waist and downward, searching. His fingers found the evidence he needed and cupped Eroan's firm arousal hard enough to steal Eroan's breath. There was no hiding his desires now. *Wrong*, his mind tried to tell him, but his body had already betrayed him. Lysander's eyes were cold. Last night... it hadn't been anything like this. Last night, Lysander had been loving. That wasn't man, this was dragon.

Lysander's fingers tugged at his fly, unlacing it. Eroan made a small effort to pull his arms free. Lysander's grip on his wrists tightened and so did the hand on Eroan's cock, pleasure cresting. Anticipation spun through him, lighting him up.

Then Lysander's hand was gone. Eroan's trousers jerked down, exposing his ass and Lysander's spreading hand, the male's tingling touch a temptation all of its own. Eroan had never taken another male in. He'd always been the one in control, always the leader, never led.

Pressure pushed at his hole. Lysander eased a wet finger in. Eroan shifted, wincing as an uncomfortable pain opened him up. Doubt stoked a little fear alive but then Lysander's hot mouth fell to Eroan's neck, his hand once again back on Eroan's cock, working him into a mind-numbing frenzy, emptying out those fears. Then Lysander's moistened hand vanished from his cock, leaving Eroan panting and writhing and aching, his mind and body a wreck of warring needs. He barely felt Lysander's arousal nudge his opening until Lysander pushed, and a new, luscious pressure sparked off an intense pleasure, one that took all the fear and sense of wrongness and made it so very right.

"Damn you for feeling so good." Lysander's raw voice touched the back of Eroan's neck and Lysander pushed himself in deep, filling Eroan, igniting a new kind of heat. When he eased out, Eroan groaned at the loss and chased that sensation, needing to be filled again.

"Tell me you want this..." Lysander's weight smothered his back, crushing his trapped hands between them. "Tell me," Lysander growled.

By Alumn, he wanted it, he wanted Lysander so deep that he'd forget who he was and what he was supposed to be and not be. He wanted that feeling of being filled, being taken and owned, the feeling of freefall and the pulsing, building ecstasy. "Yes."

Lysander thrust in. Pleasure and pain crackled low in Eroan's back, jolting a sharp dart of pure pleasure through him. More. He wanted—needed—more. Lysander's thrusting pace grew urgent, his grunts coming rough and hard and that too rode Eroan's desires higher. A new, sensual pleasure arched up his back, the pressure and closeness making him feel connected to another like never before. The delicious feel of having a male inside of him touched places he hadn't known could feel so good.

He squeezed muscle around Lysander's cock, heard the dragon's rolling groan and clamped again. Lysander's thighs relentlessly slapped his ass. Then Lysander fell forward again and matched his frantic beat to that of his hand gripping Eroan's erection. The gem, the war, the hate, his people, the risk, the hurt, it all fell away, buried beneath the rawness of having

Lysander fuck him into the table. Alumn, this was a madness, one he willingly took and made his own.

Lysander's breaths shuddered, rhythm stuttering, the hand at Eroan's cock suddenly jerking. Lysander's grip on Eroan's wrists tightened toward pain, but only for a few moments, then Lysander's final thrusts spilled his seed.

Eroan shoved back, ripping a gasp from Lysander. The dragon's grip hardened around Eroan's needing erection, worked him harder, his expert hand suddenly directly linked to the animal part of Eroan's mind. Ecstasy built, higher and higher. The release crested over him, sparking up his back, coming harder with Lysander's fullness still inside. He thrust into Lysander's grip until he was spent, breathless, wrecked and trembling.

Lysander pulled free too soon, wet seed spilling from Eroan's hole, and for a few long, sensual moments, Lysander teased the slickness between Eroan's thighs and up, pushing a finger in, touching him intimately, before inching out. "Still want me dead, Eroan Ilanea?" the dragon purred.

Eroan yanked his wrists free and kicked back, turning to show Lysander the truth on his face. He pulled the table drawer open, plucked out the gem and threw it at him.

Lysander fumbled the gem as it bounced against his chest, but managed to catch the lump of shining, purple crystals. Whatever that rock was, Lysander looked at it like it held all the answers. Eroan knew how it throbbed with darkness. It was not a tool for good.

"I hope it's worth it." Eroan sneered, tucking himself away. "Get out."

Lysander tidied himself and retied his trousers, his face back to its hard, impenetrable mask. He backed toward the door, shadowed gaze lingering on Eroan like he wanted to say more, but it was too late for words.

The dragon's touch still scorched his thighs and wrists and now it was done, he wondered if this thing between them was now broken for good. "If you ever hurt my people, I'll put a blade through your dragon-heart and your head on a stake."

"I'd expect nothing less from Eroan Ilanea," Lysander grumbled. He tossed the gem in the air, caught it, and turned toward the door, but before leaving, some indecision held him back. "There's a disused tunnel running beneath the tower to the northwest. A collapse years ago made it almost impassable. It's unguarded." Then he was out the door and gone.

Eroan waited for the barks of alarm to sound from outside, for the Order shouts, but when the alarm didn't come, he slumped against the table.

Dampness gathered between his legs. He reeked of dragon. Roughly tugging off his clothes, he dove into the shower.

Water hissed into his hair and pounded against his shoulders. Leaves and grit swirled around the drain. Eroan watched the dirt vanish, his head spinning so much, he reached out and braced an arm against the wall, letting cool water rush down his back and legs. His wrists burned, the ghost of Lysander's grip still there. *Tell me you want this...*

He had a way into the tower. If Lysander was to be believed...

Damn Lysander... Damn him to Ifreann and back. Eroan had given himself completely, even crafted that dragon token like a lovestruck fool. Had it always been a game to him? Had he ever needed saving or had his life been exactly the way he wanted it? He recalled the drunken prince from the tower and the cry for help in his eyes. That plea wasn't there now.

What was it the old female dragon at the tower had said to him... that Lysander wouldn't ask for help, and he'd fight Eroan? Was this that challenge, or had she been messing with his head too?

The mocking things Lysander had said, Eroan could hear them again now and still his wretched heart clung onto the threads of hope thinking... thinking what? That Lysander was still good?

If he wasn't good, what did that make Eroan? He'd just allowed Lysander to fuck him and *liked* it. He'd more than liked it. What if Curan had been right? Was Eroan broken somewhere inside and it had started with the queen, with the prison and the chains? Started and never stopped. He would know if he was compromised, wouldn't he?

Was any of last night real?

You were the sweetest one-night fuck I've ever had.

He hissed in through his teeth, and let the cold water numb him through. It didn't matter. He couldn't let it matter. The humans would soon be here. More from the Order were arriving, and they were all looking to him for the future. Lysander was gone. Eroan had to let it end there.

You never gave up on me.

I never will.

He gently thumped a fist against the wall and rested his forehead against the wood. Lysander needed him more now than ever but Eroan had no idea how to save him this time, or even if he could.

“Eroan?” Seraph’s voice penetrated the hiss of the water. “You there?”

“I’ll be right out.” He sounded normal, didn’t he? A bit gruff, perhaps.

“Are you all right?”

He cleared the hitch in his throat, switched off the water, and poked a hand out the door. “Hand me a towel?” Soft fabric landed in his grip.

“When you didn’t return, Nye sent three prides out looking for you.”

“I had an encounter.” He ruffled the towel over his hair and down his face, hoping the muffle hid any other tremors. “I dealt with it.”

“I thought I smelled dragon...” Closer to the door, she whispered, “Did he show?”

He knotted the towel around his waist and stilled, hardening his heart. Seraph liked Lysander. If she knew how he’d changed... “No.”

He pushed all thoughts and feeling about Lysander far away where they couldn’t undermine what had to be done going forward. The humans would be here soon with their ingenious weapons and now he had a way to get inside the tower—a parting gift from Lysander. It was time to strike at the dragons’ heart.

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CHAPTER 46



Lysander

LYSANDER SLOWED when the forest cover thinned and the risk of a keen-sighted elf seeing him had passed. Echoing dragoncalls broke the quiet and the taste of ash landed on his tongue. He stumbled against a tree, charred bark coming away beneath his hands, and closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing. But behind closed eyes, he saw Eroan's furious face, heard Eroan's scathing words, felt him warm and hard and tasting of freedom. Pushing him away had been the right thing to do. Lysander had to believe that because there was no getting him back.

He sank to a crouch and thumped his head back against the tree. Once. Twice. A bite of pain chased the guilt away and a knot clogged his throat, bottling rising emotion behind it. If forsaking Eroan had been so right a thing, why did it hurt so bad? After Mirann, after Dokul, the dungeons, after every-fucking-thing, there was no room in his world for stupid, stubborn, honorable elves who didn't know when to quit. After last night, he'd known Eroan would follow him into death, because the damn elf knew no other way. Eroan would get himself killed for him. And Lysander wasn't worth that sacrifice.

He shoved a hand into his pocket and scooped up the amethyst. The gem throbbed warm and strong, like a living, pumping organ. It didn't have the same feel to it as his shifting magic, but it had power. How else could a

rock feel alive? Only this mattered now, and getting his wings back. The fantasy of last night was over. He had to return to a reality, survive it, and somehow thrive inside its dark heart. This gem was the key to that. The gem... and forgetting Eroan existed.

He left the tree cover and headed across the open barrenlands toward the tower jutting out of the horizon. Bronze wings caught the blood-red sunset, making the usurpers look as though they were ablaze. He'd considered sneaking in after dark, but stealth wouldn't solve whatever he found inside. Clearly, the bronze had arrived in huge numbers and showed no signs of leaving. As he drew closer to the tower grounds, the lookouts barked their warnings, but none flew down to stop him.

Inside the tower's many corridors, the smell of wet metal assaulted his nose. Faces he didn't recognize watched him pass, expressions blank. He made sure to match their indifference with his own.

The fire in Carline's kitchen grate had burned down to ash and the dragon's chambers were empty. He'd never known her to be anywhere else. In fact, he'd never seen her outside the tower.

Standing in the chamber doorway, he felt the gem throb in his coat pocket. Without Carline, he didn't know enough about it to utilize whatever power it held. He had to find her, and fast.

"Lysander Bronze, you're required in the feasting hall."

Anger fizzled at the end of his nerves. He turned his head and fixed the lower in his sights. Just another metal-stinking male. Itching restlessness had him wanting to throw the fool against the wall. Their presence here was an insult, a disrespect. It was an act of aggression, of war and while Lysander felt no more part of amethyst than he did bronze, these walls *had* been his home.

"Did you hear me?" the lower asked, brow rising.

"I heard you, bitch," he snarled, rounding on the lower. The stranger wore a large hoop earring and metal bands across his biceps. When he spoke, a piercing bobbed in his tongue. Just the scent of him made Lysander's gut churn, a scent he'd been buried in for weeks. A creeping thread of fear began to work its way through his anger. He stamped it down, burying it under the hate for the bronze. "Where's my brother, *the king*?"

"Waiting in the hall..." Malice lit up the bronze's eyes.

What else was waiting in the hall for him?

A moment passed between them. The bronze was twice his weight. He might even get a few pendulum swings in. Lysander was faster and better trained. Lysander could take him but fighting a lower would only delay the inevitable meeting with Dokul. He dropped a hand into his pocket to find the beat of the gem. His fingers brushed the wooden dragon carving and regret stabbed him in the chest. The past was done. He had vengeance to sate. “Take me to the hall.”

When the lower turned his back, Lysander followed, lifting the necklace free and fixing it around his neck. He tucked the token out of sight, inside his shirt, and breathed in the teasing scent of fresh wood and pine needles, absorbing the familiar scent before it could escape. He’d use the memories of being wrapped in Eroan’s arms to keep the dark at bay. A dark he willingly walked toward now. There was no room in this world for the dragon he had been before, the dragon who had watched the stars drift across the sky while a proud elf slept tucked against him. He knew that now, and with every step toward the feasting hall, he cast off that vulnerable outer shell, building himself a new layer of invisible iron.



HE COULDN’T DECIDE if it was blood he tasted in the feasting hall air or just the stench of metal. His boots clunked through trails of sticky, shining black ooze: arterial blood. Snaking trails of it led to the dead. From the large number of bodies, bronze had hit hard and fast, killing many amethyst before they’d had a chance to draw their weapons or shift. The rest of amethysts’ more powerful flights were in chains, heads down and lined up as though facing their execution. The sight of those chains, the smell of the massacre roused the primal part of him, stretching power into his veins. He was going to need it. At the back of the hall, perched on the edge of a table, sat Dokul.

The formidable male—all shimmering smooth skin and tarnished metal—wore a broad smirk and leaned on one drawn-up knee, rubbing his thumb against the fingers of his right hand, probably remembering what it had felt like to have Lysander in his claws.

Fear tried to sink its talons into Lysander but that too he blocked off, welcoming a shallow numbness. He could master fear now. Dokul was just

another monster he'd already survived once.

A female dressed in a simple lowers' gown sat at the bench beside the bronze chief, her smooth head tilted downward, hands cradled in her lap. It took a few moments for Lysander to recognize her. Mirann. She'd healed some, at least on the outside, but her shoulders and arms were riddled with the scars Lysander had inflicted.

The fear inside Lysander tried to twitch free of its bindings. He held firm, stopped his approach in front of Dokul, and wore the same mask he'd always used when his mother went searching for a reaction.

"The prince returns." Dokul's deep voice rumbled about the vast hall. "We did wonder if you'd fled? You can't fly..." He chuckled. "So perhaps you ran like humans would?"

A few of the gathered bronze snickered. Lysander cast a glance over the hundreds here. All bronze. Any surviving amethyst lower would likely be deeper inside the tower, the bronze bastards having their fun with them. The amethyst flights on their knees could still shift and rip free of the chains, but to do so would be seen as a weakness and none had yet given into that temptation. Whatever he thought of amethyst, they had pride.

"In your absence, the tower was left to this one..." Dokul swept a hand to his right and the crowd parted, revealing Akiem in royal robes, on his knees, chains bound around bloody and raw wrists. Blood dripped from his dark hair. Smeared, bloody fingerprints had dried across his cheek and jaw. He'd been cut and beaten, and fuck knew what else. Akiem didn't look over. He only had eyes for Dokul. Lysander wasn't even sure if his brother knew he'd arrived, or maybe he just didn't care enough to acknowledge him.

Dokul heaved his bulk out of the throne and stood, slowly approaching Lysander. "Akiem never had enough authority over Elisandra's flights—that was always *you*." He pointed a thick finger. "Didn't have the balls to back up his short-lived reign either." Dokul shrugged his broad, pauldron-capped shoulder. "Balls that now belong to me." The male grinned and his eyes sparkled with slippery glee. "Yet I doubt he'll be as much fun as you."

So he hadn't fucked Akiem. Yet.

Lysander's mouth twitched. He should have been here last night. The bronze might not have broken through the amethyst flights had he organized their defense. Akiem was likely thinking the same, if he was thinking at all. Lysander had abandoned them at precisely the right time for

the bronze to attack. Lysander *Bronze*. Akiem probably thought he was complicit in all of this.

“I intend to ruin this whelp who calls himself king,” Dokul explained. “An eye for an eye, for what you did to my daughter.” Dokul tilted his head, eyeing Lysander side-on. “I might make a bronze of you yet.” Holding out a hand, he added, “Daughter, stand.”

Mirann rose like a ghost. Dressed in a tight-fitting slip of a gown, she looked small, vulnerable. Lysander took more of his regret and shame and used it to reinforce the wall around him.

Dokul offered his hand and his daughter stepped forward, her hand on her swollen belly, red-eyes glassy and pupils wide. The tracks on her inner arms suggested she’d been given the same poison she’d inflicted on Lysander. Or perhaps she chose to take it as an escape to whatever the amethyst lowers had done to her.

Dokul watched closely for a reaction. Lysander gave none, although a fluttering panic at the sight of her belly tried to break his armor down. Given her size, the clutch she was growing inside had to be a few months on, the timing right for having been impregnated at the coupling. He hadn’t cared enough to notice her change before, and once she had him drugged, he had been incapable of seeing much of anything, but now there was no mistaking her distended belly, ripe with eggs.

“Half of amethyst fucked her,” he dismissed.

A muscle twitched above Dokul’s right eye. “She’s too far along for the clutch to be any but yours.”

By the great gods, the last thing he’d wanted was more dragons—stronger dragons. Bronze and amethyst hybrids. The spawn would be monstrous. In all of this he’d hoped, after the coupling, that his seed was as broken as the rest of him. It made sense for it to be that way. Clearly, that wasn’t the case. “Should I care?”

“Care? No.” Dokul laughed along. “When they’re hatched, you’ll understand.” He left Mirann’s side and approached Lysander. “Why do you think she so badly had to fuck you, prince?” He reached out a hand, thick fingers wavering close.

Lysander lifted his chin. In his pocket, he closed his hand around the gem. “Touch me—I’ll break your fingers and worse.”

Desire lit up the brute’s eyes. “Tempting threats. I hear you’ve gained a reputation since returning from my care. Fond of a whip, the lowers told

me. Now there's a kink I didn't expect, and one I'd be delighted to explore..."

Lysander swallowed a bubbling rage before it could blind him.

"Do you not wonder why your mother kept you dumb? Why she so badly wanted your coupling with a bronze? Or why my Mirann was so focused on having you? You're pretty to look at, but you're hardly a fierce specimen. But as dragon... As dragon you are..." He paused, searching for the right words. "Something else. You are *emerald*, and that, Prince, is priceless."

He was done with hearing Dokul's bullshit. "You need to leave this tower. Take your bitch of a daughter and your fucked-up metal brood with you."

"And who is going to make me? You?" Dokul leaned closer. His metal-capped teeth shining. "Your flights are scattered, in chains, or dead." He raked his gaze down Lysander, mouth parted, eyes full. "All those years when she could have trained you... Such a waste... She was afraid. Did you know?"

His teasing taunts weren't going to work. "What do you want, Dokul?" The growl came unbidden, rumbling up from Lysander's chest.

Dokul's smile flashed. "You. Beneath me. Your hybrid brood raised as my own. All of amethyst below me, where they belong. There is a whole world to rule. Not just these lands, but lands beyond, where people still fight and human cities clutch at life. Diamond, onyx, ruby, sapphire. With you, the last emerald at my side and your brood as my weapons, they will *all* be under me. I alone will be king."

He was mad. Lysander had known it, but now he saw that madness as clear as day, glittering on Dokul's tarnished golden eyes. Dokul couldn't rule them all, and what sense did it make to even try? Because the bronze had an insatiable need to take, to own, a need Lysander recognized in himself. All dragons had it, but some allowed it purchase in their minds, allowed that need to control them. Dokul was a creature of singular purpose. There would be no reasoning with him, Lysander realized. Only his death would end this nightmare, and after him, the death of all the bronze. But to do that, Lysander needed both wings working. He needed more time.

"And if I refuse?"

Dokul lifted a hand and one of the bronze dragged a captured amethyst forward. The male struggled against the chain, his eyes flicking hopefully to Lysander. He missed the bronze free a knife from behind his back. The blade slashed fast and true, opening a bloody smile in the amethyst's throat before he could invite the shift. Blood spurted, splashing the stone floor. The bronze dropped his prey and landed a kick in the male's side. He likely didn't feel it, the light in his eyes faded as quickly as the blood left his veins.

A deep, trembling growl bubbled to Lysander's left. "Kill another and I'll shift right here," Akiem warned.

Dokul's smile twitched. "And destroy your own seat of power in the resulting fight? You fought me once and limped off with your tail between your legs. This tower has stood longer than amethyst have existed. Your mother ruled it, the grand matriarch before her, and before her... The great metals did not need towers to rule from. You can't fight me, Akiem. Vicious you might be, but you're no match for my bite. You'll not risk it, *prince*."

Dokul's heavy hand landed on Lysander's shoulder. "Submit to me and this slaughter ends."

His golden eyes pulled Lysander deeper. The ancient creature stirred behind that glare. A creature so old it was a wonder it could reason at all.

Lysander dropped his gaze to Dokul's thick hand, remembering how the chief's calluses had grazed his hips in the human-made cage, how he'd tried to fuck him and failed then, but not later. Dokul didn't care who Lysander was, he realized. It was nothing to do with the crown at all. He wanted *what* Lysander was: Emerald. "Why me, Dokul?"

"Why you... that's the question, isn't it?" The big male's voice boomed about the chamber. "We learned to kill all emeralds the moment they broke from the egg. Better that than allow them to grow to maturity. When you hatched, your mother believed she was cursed. She should have killed you herself. Too afraid, she encouraged your whelp of a brother to finish you."

Akiem didn't hear or didn't care. He continued to glare at Dokul, his cheek fluttering.

"When he tried and failed, she instead thought to use you, as she used many things in her life, but she could never control you, not fully."

Lysander's attention lingered on Akiem. One of his brother's dark brows flickered. Whatever Dokul spoke of, Akiem knew it too. Mirann's distant gaze was too far away to read, but it was true that she'd have done

anything to ensure the coupling went ahead. Everyone wanted a piece of him. A piece of emerald. The only difference between him and the rest was his healing ability, but even that was weak, and dragons had never cared for such skills. “Why?” he asked Dokul again.

“Kneel to me, submit to me as mine, and I’ll tell you everything.” Dokul’s thick, slick fingers brushed Lysander’s cheek.

Bile burned the back of his throat. He met the male’s penetrative glare with his own, offering a challenge. The bronze’s grip twisted, clutching the left side of Lysander’s face.

Instincts tried to pull Lysander from the male’s grotesque touch and spill dragon into his veins, but that too, he pushed down, building more and more layers of armor around it all, until all that was left inside was cold iron and the throbbing, roiling fire of vengeance.

Lysander grabbed the amethyst gem in his fist, holding it so tightly its jagged edges cut into his palm. Leaning closer, he clamped a hand around the back of Dokul’s warm, gritty neck and yanked the male close enough to kiss. “You come into my territory and take my flights as your own, you kill amethyst like they are nothing, and you chain up my brother, the king. You are a thief, Dokul Bronze, and I do not suffer thieves.” Dokul’s mouth twisted. Lysander continued, “I will never kneel to you. I’ll fight you and your bronze with every breath I have left. Do you hear me through all that madness? You will never reign over amethyst and you will never reign over *me*.”

Dokul roared himself free. “I *have* taken it, whelp!” he announced. “Like I took you, my teeth at your throat and my cock in your ass.” He grabbed his crotch and snarled. “You will all kneel to me as it should have been in the beginning before you wretched jeweled were spawned from chaos. You are all mistakes!” Spitfire flew. The male’s face flushed red, veins bulging. “You were not meant to be! I was a first. I OWN YOU ALL.”

He plunged into the line of restrained amethyst and grabbed one, dragging her twisting and scrabbling on her hands and knees to the front.

Carline.

A dangerous edge plucked on Lysander’s armor, threatening to break it open and spill power, tooth and claw into this hall, into him.

“Don’t!” Akiem tried to stand. His bronze guard struck him across his cheek, knocking him back.

“I’ve finally found someone you both care about... Interesting.” Dokul flung Carline to the floor and stalked around her. “Some lower hag? Or something else?” Around and around he walked while Carline kept her head bowed, her silvery hair sprung from its bands and fallen about her face, hiding her expression. “There’s something familiar about you... The mother figure the princes never had?” Dokul grinned, reading his answers on Akiem’s face. “Maybe I’ll fuck her right here, in front of you all, rip her open so you can see what it is to deny my claim.”

“Let her go,” Lysander warned, mental restraints straining to hold the shift within.

Dokul grabbed a fist of Carline’s hair and yanked her to her feet, against his chest. She didn’t cry out, didn’t protest. “Kneel, whelp,” he ordered Lysander and switched his glare to Akiem. “Both of you submit to me, *now*.”

Carline’s compassionate eyes widened. In them was a plea not to let Dokul beat him. She threw the same look toward Akiem and Lysander heard his brother’s growl simmering again.

The gem in his pocket, clutched tightly in his hand, throbbed in time with Lysander’s heart, pumping power and blood and lust and rage through his body. He couldn’t hold it back for long, but perhaps just long enough to get close enough.

Lysander stepped forward.

Carline’s gaze turned fearful. She thought he was going to kneel. The entire gathering of amethyst likely feared the same. He was bronze anyway, but not by choice. Never by choice.

He pulled the gem from his pocket and threw it to Carline. She reached up a hand, neatly catching it. Her soft, aging face instantly hardened, then before Lysander’s eyes, she dropped the gem. It *tinked* against the stone, drawing the gaze of everyone in the hall.

The old dragon brought the heel of her boot down with a ringing slam, smashing it into countless glittering shards, tinkling across the floor.

Lysander’s heart stuttered. But... his wing?! She’d told him he needed it to fix his wing... She’d said it would change everything. He’d betrayed Eroan’s trust for that gem.

“No!” Akiem lunged, not toward Carline, but for the glittering remains of the gem. The bronze holding him struggled to keep him, and Akiem tore free, then fell to his knees, wrist shackles rattling, and scooped up the

broken pieces as though he could somehow miraculously slot them all back together.

He swung his glare to Lysander. “*What have you done?!*”

The worst of it was, he didn’t know, but it felt like something terrible and the cruel, twisted smile on Carline’s face confirmed it. A smile that warped and twitched as magic poured into the space Carline occupied. That magic tasted like death, like wet rust and doused flames.

Dread sank in his gut.

Mirann’s laugh clawed at Lysander’s mind, but he couldn’t look away from Carline’s transformation as threads of power unwrapped her human form and filled the air with golden scale. Some part of his brain told him to leave, to run and not look back because the creature emerging before him *was* death and decay and the end of all things.

Akiem slammed into Lysander. His hands snagged on Lysander’s wrist and pulled, but still he couldn’t look away, as though this emerging creature demanded to be admired. Scale built on scale, crafting ladders over enormous muscles and then it was there, too big, too surreal, too much a legend for Lysander to wrap his thoughts around. *Gold*, was all his mind supplied. *She is gold*.

“Run!” Akiem pulled, tugging Lysander back from beneath the golden beast’s shadow.

He looked up and up to a monstrous head gnarled and jagged with scales, and to the crown: its spears thrust back, shining golden, the greatest of metals. The first terrible queen to claw through the thawing ice and breach the human world.

When she opened her enormous mouth and roared, the noise barreled through him, jolting his body into action, but skewering his power deep inside. Rock rained from the ceiling, the floor cracked and the walls shifted, dust exploding into the air. More dragons shifted around them, claws and wings suddenly thrust into the air. He ran hard and fast, dashing through gaps and out into narrow corridors behind Akiem.

Carline was—is—Gold.

I freed the Gold.

It didn’t make any sense. Why hadn’t she revealed herself before? Why was she here?

The gem.

Elisandra’s gem.

Carline hadn't wanted it to fix his wing, she'd wanted it to free herself from a prison nobody had seen.

Akiem threw back a wall tapestry, revealing a hidden door behind, and pulled Lysander into the dark. A spiral staircase twisted downward. The sound of their boots thundering on steps accompanied the frantic beat of Lysander's racing heart.

"Where does this lead?" he asked, startled to hear his voice carry far into the dark ahead.

"Out."

A roar shook the stairwell, raining dust from above.

"Wait..." Lysander slowed. "Akiem, wait..."

His brother pulled up short and glared up at him. "What?!" He strained against the wrist shackles, tried to yank them apart and swore when they held.

"Back there... I... I didn't know."

"Didn't know what exactly? That Dokul was coming for me or that Carline was Gold?"

"Both, neither. I knew the bronze were coming—"

"And you left." Akiem fell back against the damp stonewall. "I could not fight them all. Too many amethyst would have died..."

"I had planned to return before he—"

"You're my brother. Where were you?!"

With Eroan. "I'm your brother now?! Kin means shit to you. You threw me in that fucking dungeon!"

"Because you're bronze!" Akiem snarled back. "You son of a breeding-bitch. This is all your fault." He stepped forward, fists clenched. "Everything is your fault. Amalia... this. All of it." The fight faded out of him. He stepped back and fell against the wall. "Why couldn't you have just died when we were hatched?!"

Amalia? What? "No. I didn't do this. The gem, I thought... I didn't know its power held hers."

"Of course you didn't," he sneered. "We need to keep moving. Dokul and Carline together..." He stared down the steps, into the dark. "Two Great Gods. We must get as far away as we can."

Lysander descended a few more steps, stopping on Akiem's level. His eyes flared a warning for Lysander to back off. "You knew about Carline?"

“I guessed,” Akiem admitted. “A long time ago. The matriarch, our grandmother, had her trapped... the gem was hers, then Elisandra’s. I only know because I found it and Elisandra... She did not react well.” Akiem rubbed at his forehead. “We must leave. It’s not over. Together they are stronger than us.”

Akiem’s eyes seemed brighter in the dark, but from fear. The only time Lysander had seen fear on Akiem’s face was the night Amalia was exiled. “Why is Amalia my fault?”

“It doesn’t matter...”

Lysander grabbed Akiem’s chains and pulled, snapping the links. Akiem didn’t linger to thank him and continued the descent. “The jeweled stole our reign from the metals. They will destroy this tower, destroy all of us, it’s all they know.”

“Why was I not told about any of this?!”

“Because you’re a fucking *emerald*.”

He kept hearing this accusation, like it was a crime. “What difference does the color of my scales make?”

Akiem stopped and sighed, shoulders heaving. “I only know that what Dokul said was true, Elisandra feared you.” When he glanced back, his gaze skimmed. “Come.”

He followed Akiem into the dark, knowing his brother had just lied.

CHAPTER 47



Eroan

THE BAND of humans traipsed through Cheen's open gates, their clothes bedraggled and faces grim. An Order pride instructed to escort them the last mile flanked the column, the obvious racial differences suddenly stark. Humans stomped, bodies stockier, heavier, with a physical strength echoed in the dragons. Whereas elves seemed both harsher in appearance and yet more fluid, the difference between maces swung in battle and well-balanced swords. All around, elves watched the humans arrive, studying their visitors as those visitors studied the elves. Hundreds of years and generations had passed since humans and elves had fought side-by-side, hundreds of years since humans had abandoned elves mid-battle, since their devastating weapon dropped, changing things forever. Eroan hoped to change things forever again, but for the better. It couldn't get much worse.

Chloe led the column, her face lifting the moment she spotted Eroan.

Anye, in her white robes, approached first. "You'll find my people friendly and welcoming," the elder greeted, her smile warm but not without its own thin edge, "just so long as you return the courtesy."

Eroan half-listened to the pair exchange polite greetings but kept his gaze on the assassins still flanking the humans, each one a formidable presence. The humans were armed with what appeared to be pistols, their hands resting close by to those weapons. Eroan smelled dragon on them,

which likely accounted for the skittish look in his pride's eyes. Dragons had once routinely infiltrated humans, another reason for elves to distrust these outsiders. The scent likely came from various scuffles along their journey.

Change had to begin with trust.

Catching Nye's eye, Eroan nodded him over. "Tell the Order to withdraw. These people are no threat to us. But stay observant."

Anye arranged a meeting in the hall once the band was settled and allocated a number of elves to help them find lodgings. He watched the group separate and nervous smiles bloom. The anxiety would pass, given time, but time was in short supply.

A short while later, Eroan met with Anye, Chloe, and a tall, slim man with skin the color of charred wood who constantly shifted on his feet. Not from anxiety though, more from excitement.

"Eroan, *mon dieu*," Chloe's arms briefly settled around him. "It is good to see you again." He embraced her, breathing in the smell of the sea and human. "This is Ben." She withdrew and gestured at the man beside her.

Ben's grin lit up his friendly face. He extended his hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

Eroan took the hand, giving it a firm shake. His accent was easier on Eroan's ears than Chloe's. Familiar, but different.

"American," Chloe explained.

Eroan had no idea what that word meant, but he recalled Chloe's father mentioning the land across the great ocean called something like *American*. If Chloe trusted him, then Eroan was sure the male was worthy, although his constant gestures and fidgeting made Eroan want to sit him down and order him to stay put.

"We have much to discuss." Chloe added, "Details I could not put into letters. Ben is a scientist, of sorts. He's here to exchange knowledge, after we're settled, if that's acceptable with you?"

Ben took that as his cue to explain, "More of a dracologist, I guess. I've made it my life's work to study all races of dragon." He spoke quickly, as though desperate to impart that knowledge to all.

"Have you found any weaknesses?" Eroan asked.

"Some. There are various quirks to their physiology." He laughed, short and sharp, although Eroan had no idea what was so amusing. "I could spend days explaining. For instance, different dragons produce their own unique

type of fire. Some, like diamond, don't produce fire at all, but a plasma-based semi-liquid substance. It burns through surfaces like fire."

"But we understand we don't have much time?" Chloe interrupted, addressing Eroan and Anye.

"The number of dragons at the tower is increasing daily. We're concerned they're preparing for an attack," Anye began, then nodded to Eroan to continue.

"We've recently discovered a disused tunnel. We have scouts observing it now. If it proves to be accessible, it could be the way in we've been looking for. And with your numbers now joining our ranks, we could very likely deal a devastating blow to the amethysts, but we must act quickly."

He'd told Anye how he'd discovered the tunnel by accident after observing the tower with the spyglass from a distance. It was a good lie, one that sat easily with Eroan. Better a lie than the truth, that the amethyst prince had told him as a goodbye token, right after fucking him against a table.

Chloe removed a fist-sized cylinder from inside her coat and set it on the table. "I was hoping you'd found a way inside by the time we'd arrived. This is something Ben's team has been working on. The aerosol inside, when released in a confined place, brings a dragon down inside of fifteen seconds."

The can didn't look at all deadly. He'd seen similar containers buried in the earth and overlooked them as metal from the human age. Eyeing the can in disbelief, Eroan frowned. It didn't seem possible something so small could bring down a dragon. "Kills it?"

"No, unfortunately," Chloe replied. "That is where you come in. The gas inside will render dragons unconscious for up to ten minutes. At least, it does with the dragons we've been able to test it on."

He reached out for the cylinder. "May I?"

"Go ahead," Ben agreed. "Just don't pull the tag. It doesn't do much to humans but make them drowsy. I'm not sure of the effect on elves. I've... er... I've not met one of you before to... you know, test it."

The cylinder was heavier than it looked. Eroan weighed it in his hand. Carrying more than three would slow an elf down. "What dragon-types have you exposed to it?"

"Diamond, mostly. They're the predominant race in Spain and northern Africa, where I was stationed before traveling north to France."

“No bronze? Amethyst?”

“One amethyst, but it was young and already disorientated. The gas worked in an enclosed space. We haven’t tested it on any metals. You have bronze here?”

“Yes, many,” Anye said. “There’s increasing bronze activity at the tower.”

Ben nodded, thinking it over. “I haven’t personally encountered a metal before, but as long as their physiology isn’t too different to the jeweled, the signs are good that the gas will work on them. It’s the best shot we have right now.”

They discussed the risks while Eroan considered what he’d seen of the tower layout. In a confined place, a deployable gas could sweep through the corridors almost undetected, and even if it was discovered, fifteen seconds wasn’t enough time for the alarm to be raised. Once the dragons were down, killing them was a matter of thrusting a blade into the skull behind the crown. Ten minutes was more than enough time. “This could be the perfect solution.” To Anye, he said, “Have our outfitters make us some masks. Use charcoal to filter the gas.”

Chloe’s eager expression mirrored Eroan’s racing heart. “How soon can you be ready?” he asked her.

“A few hours of rest and we’ll be ready.”

Eroan handed the canister back to Ben. “How many of those do you have?”

“Over a hundred. We found a stash a few years ago in an abandoned military base in Gibraltar,” Ben replied. “Enough to flush that tower if we can get deep enough inside before the radiation dose gets too high.”

“Radiation?” Eroan had never heard that word before.

Ben glanced at Anye and found another equally baffled expression. “Your entire south coast is radioactive, we assume from the nuclear fallout—the danger-zone is to the west.” He said it as though surprised Eroan wasn’t aware. “You’ve likely evolved a resistance to it, or it could be elves are naturally immune.” He scratched at his nose and smiled nervously again. “I’d like... I mean, I’d love to, you know... get a closer look at you.” Anye blinked back at him. “At elf physiology, I mean. Strictly for ... science.”

Nuclear? Radiation? These words and their meanings were alien to him. “The human weapon fell generations ago.” Chloe’s father had shown him

huge maps with a great spread of darkness from the Whitelands out at sea. “The blast was to the west, in a land out at sea, far from here.”

“The fallout has dissipated some,” Ben went on, “which is why life thrives here. But the entire landscape will remain radioactive many more thousands of years. The jeweled dragons have abilities not recorded in metals. Their mutation came from the use of nuclear weapons, producing all sorts of quirks... The radiation is what made the jeweled, not the blast itself. I wonder if it altered elves?”

“Altered us?” Anye asked. “In what way?”

He chuckled again, and glanced at Chloe, looking for help. “Without studying your history, it’s difficult to know.”

“Oh...” Anye blinked and looked to Eroan, although he couldn’t imagine why, before darting back to Ben. “Do you mean we may have changed after the blast?”

“Yes, it’s possible. You get your energy from the sun, right? You need light to live. Were you always that way?”

“Yes, but... there was a time it was said elves once had magic. Nothing like the dragons, more... a natural touch. A way to enhance naturally occurring things. Old stories... Much of it is thought to be myth, but now I wonder if those tales aren’t rooted in more?”

That was news to Eroan, although he’d heard fantasy tales of the like as an elfling.

“Do you think it could be possible the human weapon took magic from us?” Anye asked.

“It’s possible, sure,” Ben grinned. “Do you think you might be able to answer some questions and maybe I can find out more? We could learn a great deal from each other.”

Chloe cleared her throat. “Later, Ben. We must prepare.”

“Oh, yeah, right, sure. When you can.”

Both females smiled at Ben’s shy charm. “I’d like that,” Anye agreed.

Eroan frowned at Anye’s obvious flustering. “After the attack,” he said, not wanting their focus wandering. Eroan guarded his expression and tempered the rush of hope at having these people here and the possibilities they brought with them. He’d always believed humans and elves together would be a force strong enough to bring down the dragons. This could be the beginning. All eyes had turned to him. He nodded. “Rest up from your

journey. Provided the latest reports from the tunnel lookouts are clear, we attack at first light.”



EROAN SPENT the night making sure every member of the Order had been briefed. The last time he'd had a pride rally around him, he'd been the sole survivor. But assassins were trained to fight and to die for the cause. And they'd do the same at the tower at dawn. He trusted every single individual would give it their all.

Stealing a quiet moment a few hours before dawn, he wandered the meandering path leading to the old, gnarled oak found deep within Cheen. One flame torch lit the clearing on approach to the oak, making the countless ribbons tied among the tree's branches dance with light. The leaves were full now and vibrant in daylight, but shadows crowded the enormous tree in the dark.

Eroan pressed a hand to the rough bark and looked up. Ribbons flittered, one for every branch, it seemed. One for every severed life-string. He'd tied many ribbons to Cheen's tree in his time. Too many. Curan's was there, as were all those belonging to the elves he'd dug out of the mud.

Had anyone thought to remove his when he returned, or did it still flutter in the breeze as a sign of things to come?

He knelt among the roots and bowed his head. Alumn's tree hummed with life. It had sprouted from an acorn long before the dragons, when human monuments reached into the skies. Its roots traveled deep into the ground, where humans had once boarded great snake-like machines to travel through tunnels on vast distances. If this tree had survived for so long, then so could his people.

Alumn, please let this be right.

The soft noises from the village drifted to him on the breeze, a gentle reminder of what he fought for.

He'd already lost a home. He couldn't lose another.

And it all rested on Lysander's word.

The word of someone he believed he knew. The word of his enemy.

What if it was a lie, a trap? What if he was taking hundreds of elves and humans to their deaths tomorrow because Lysander had been truly broken?

If you want to trust me, you must trust all of me. I am dragon.

Eroan had trusted him. He did still. Didn't he?

The last moments they'd shared in his hut, that hadn't been Lysander. A part of him, yes. The necessary part, the part he built to survive behind. But not all of him. Lysander, the prince with a heart, was still inside the male he'd become. Eroan had to believe that. He would not give up on him.

Gentle footfalls alerted him to Nye's stealthy approach. Eroan kept a hand pressed against the tree, head bowed, praying to Alumn that he would not be adding more ribbons.

"Seraph wants to come tomorrow." Nye's voice was soft, like the times they'd lain together and Nye had talked about his life, his dreams, his nomadic family he'd left behind to pursue life as an Assassin of the Order.

"Why wouldn't she come with us?"

"I'm concerned about her attachment to the prince. It clouds her judgment."

Concerned about her attachment or Eroan's? "She is as worthy as any other. I'll not have her left behind." Eroan sat back on his legs, bringing Nye's standing figure into the corner of his right eye. He stared up into the tree canopy, probably thinking of the dead. "The tunnel?" Eroan asked.

"Clear. I took a pride inside a little ways. There's no sign of dragon activity and hasn't been for a long time, but it has good airflow. There's a way out." Nye stepped forward, pressed his hand to the trunk, muttered a few words to Alumn and crouched beside Eroan. "It's overgrown and a long way from the base of the tower. The mouth collapsed a long time ago. It's invisible unless you know to look for it."

Good. Exactly as Lysander had said.

"And you stumbled across it by chance..." Nye added.

The unspoken hung loud between them.

Eroan held Nye's gaze, waiting for him to finish the accusation.

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "I'd follow you into Alumn's light, Eroan, but this is reckless and foolish. It's not like you."

"What *this* is, is our last chance."

"Tell me the truth." Nye's gaze searched Eroan's, looking for the cracks. "How did you come to know about this tunnel?"

"Last night, after the encounter, I—"

He shook his head, looking down, cheek fluttering, clearly seeing through Eroan's lie. "I can't let you do this."

Eroan tightened his fingers on his thighs.

Nye lifted his head to the tree for guidance. "I can't let you walk them all inside that tunnel without knowing the source of the information."

Nye would never let it rest. He was too observant for excuses and vague answers. "What does it matter how I came by the information?" Eroan asked. "The tunnel exists. We must do this."

Nye's mouth tilted into a flat smile. He even laughed a little before looking Eroan in the eyes. "Do you think they'd follow you if you told them the dragon was the one who revealed the tunnel?"

His heart thudded too fast and too heavy. Nye was going to ruin everything. Eroan loosened his grip on his thighs, stretching his fingers. "No, which is why I can't tell them. This has to happen."

"I can tell them. And I will."

Nye thought he was doing the right thing. The righteous pride in his eyes was Eroan's too. It belonged to all elves. Made them stubborn, made them strong. But Nye could not win this. "Nye, see this as the opportunity it is. We have everything in place. In a few hours, we'll strike a devastating blow to the amethyst forces. With Ben's gas canisters, maybe even kill them all. These lands will be ours again, our homes safe for generations. The risk is great but the rewards are worth it."

Nye swallowed, reached out, and gripped Eroan's shoulder. "A dragon told you how to get inside the tower. Not just any dragon, the amethyst prince. Why would he do that?"

"You don't know him—"

"And you do?" He shuffled closer and eased his grip down Eroan's arm. "You think you know him?"

"I..." The right words failed Eroan. "Better than most, yes."

"You told me once that dragons are not like us. They don't think like us, they don't care like we do." He shook his head and raked his hair back from his eyes. "Is that where you were last night? Were you with him? And while you were together, he told you about this tunnel?"

Eroan winced. This conversation was one he'd planned never to have with Nye or anyone. As welcoming as elves were, the estuary had taught him his people's compassion didn't extend to dragons. No elf shall aid a dragon. None of his people could know he'd seen Lysander again. It would ruin everything. He'd be cast out, an exile, and elves would continue to die. More ribbons would be added to the tree—he looked up through the long,

reaching branches—and all because they thought him tainted by Elisandra. Her threat lingered long after her death.

“Nye, please trust me.”

“That’s exactly what happened, isn’t it? You met with the dragon.” Nye’s mouth twisted. “Tomorrow is a trap.” He scrambled to his feet. “Anye must know.” He was leaving and in moments, the whole village would think Eroan was compromised. The humans would leave. An alliance wouldn’t happen. Everything he had worked for would be over.

“Nye...” Eroan got to his feet. In a few strides, he grabbed for Nye’s arm, catching his sleeve to turn him around. “Curan saw what Lysander was like.”

Nye yanked his arm free. “Curan died because of *that* dragon. Lysander is dragon, Eroan! They’ve killed thousands of us. He’s likely killed dozens of your own prides. Tortured friends, people we loved. Dragons left you an orphan! You trained your entire life to kill them. How can you... *be* with one?”

Bitter anger burned his throat. “He’s not like that.”

Nye’s gaze desperately searched Eroan’s until his eyes suddenly widened. “Oh, Eroan... You think you love him, don’t you? You do...” His face crumpled. He thrust his hands into his hair and staggered back. “Alumn... I couldn’t understand before, but there it is...” He laughed, but the sound was ugly and dry. “You love him and he’s using that. It’s not love, Eroan. Love is... Love is being there for someone even when it hurts. Love is understanding them, all of them, even their mistakes, in a way no one else can. It’s bone deep, not some twisted infatuation leftover from what they did to you. That’s not love. It’s abuse.” Nye waited for denials that weren’t coming. “Tomorrow will be a massacre—” He cut off, turning away.

Eroan’s patience shattered.

Looping an arm around Nye’s neck, he pulled, clamping the male’s throat against his bicep and squeezing. Nye tried to twist, kick, and buck free. One well-aimed elbow dug into Eroan’s side, landing a dull thud. Eroan tightened his grip, feet planted, and waited, his own breath ragged.

Nye’s struggles slowed and in the quiet, the male’s heaving softened, until the fingers gripping Eroan’s arm fell away.

It had to be done. There was no other way. Nye would have ruined his plans, plans that would save them all.

He leaned in, slung Nye's weight over his shoulders, and carried him to the dark side of Alumn's tree. Setting him down among the roots, Eroan quickly listened for breathing. Nye's soft fluttering breaths touched Eroan's ear. Not dead.

"I'm sorry." He cupped Nye's face. "Your hatred is a price I'm willing to pay to stop amethyst." Backing up, he lifted his gaze to the tree. Thousands of ribbons gently fluttered. Mothers, fathers, children. Entire generations lost. It ended tomorrow. "Forgive me, Alumn."



THE TUNNEL'S concrete walls had held up well considering water seepage had eroded the floor into a slippery gully. Cave-ins hindered the silent line of elves and humans, but only for minutes until the rubble was cleared.

Seraph moved alongside Eroan, her glances occasionally reflecting the light from the humans' ingenious electric torches. "*They are blessed. They carry Alumn's light with them,*" she had said on the approach to the tunnel entrance. Her awe echoed in the eyes of the others. Now inside, no one spoke, as were his orders. Each elf carried a mask, ready to be deployed as soon as the gas was released. All they had to do now was get as deep as possible into the bowels of the tower.

Eroan's mind reached back to when the bronze had taken him from Elisandra's clutches, and the similar sounds of dripping water coupled with the bite of cold air. He'd been here before, or in a tunnel just like it, and took that as a sign they were on the correct path. The tunnel wasn't huge, too small for an adult dragon to squeeze through unless in human form but wide enough for his prides. And any dragons they encountered in human form could quickly be dispatched before the alarm was raised.

This would work. It had to work. It had cost too much to fail.

Nye would never forgive him.

Neither would the elders, once they learned the truth, but by then it would be too late.

Seraph had asked after Nye, as had Trey, currently at the back of the line. They'd swallowed the lie about him staying behind to guard what would otherwise be a virtually unprotected village. *Necessary*, he told himself.

A roar shook the tunnel, bouncing tiny rocks into crevices. The line hunkered down. The sound was a long way above, but formidable enough for Seraph to check Eroan. Once it was quiet, he nodded and waved the line on. There was no turning back.

He wondered if Lysander was inside and prayed to Alumn that he wasn't—if Alumn would even listen for a dragon. There hadn't been time to get a message to him and even if he had been able to, the contents would have been too much of a risk should it fall into the wrong hands.

The tunnel opened ahead in a structure similar to Ashford's buried architecture, but smaller, with three tunnels branching off. He'd expected as much and directed each pride into the new tunnel mouths. Chloe went with Trey. The male acknowledged Eroan with a small dip of his chin. First day in the Order and he was about to be part of something larger than them all.

Eroan led Seraph, two more Order assassins—Jex and Cannel—both highly capable of slaughtering dragons, and three humans deeper armed with gas canisters into the tunnels. More rumbling shook the walls, closer this time. Whatever had stirred them up would hopefully keep them distracted long enough for the gas to circulate.

Eventually, the humans' torch beams skimmed over a small side-tunnel leading off to the right.

By Eroan's estimate, they had to be beneath the tower. He nodded at the group to take the branch, and donned his mask, checking Seraph did the same. White muslin covered her mouth and nose, making her dark eyes bright. She tucked both straps behind her ears to keep the mask secure and stuck her thumbs in the air in a sign he'd seen the humans perform. He rolled his eyes. Hers crinkled with silent laughter.

The tunnel narrowed, only wide enough for two to pass, and led up a steep incline, around a sharp corner, climbing ever higher. Eroan paused, halting those behind him, and listened. A constant rumbling had grown behind the walls. It reminded him of waves on the beach or the rumble of a waterfall, but there was nothing like that this far inland. Which left the rumble of fire and dragons.

The sound of boots scraping against dirt ahead of them.

Eroan clicked his fingers and the order elves formed up. The humans took their canisters in hand. Eroan shook his head. *Not yet.* There was no point in freeing the gas too soon and losing their advantage.

The sound of boots hammered closer. Then a male appeared, running right toward them. Seraph flung her dagger. The blade struck the beast mid-chest, right over the heart. His footing stumbled. He collapsed on the blade. Dead before he'd realized he wasn't alone.

Pride swelled in Eroan's chest. He couldn't have dispatched him any quicker.

Seraph kicked the body over, retrieved her knife as easily as pulling a stem from an apple, and continued without missing a beat.

They came across another, almost colliding with her as she bolted around another sharp corner. Jex was on her, dagger across her throat, taking her down in a blur.

"Maybe we don't need the gas..." one of the humans mumbled. Eroan ignored him. Killing one or two as they happened upon them wasn't enough. They needed the gas. He just wanted to get a little deeper.

"They're all running toward us," Seraph whispered behind her mask.

The dragons were distracted. He hushed her. "Makes them easier to kill."

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CHAPTER 48



Lysander

AKIEM GRABBED one of the remaining swords from the weapons rack. The armory had been stripped, probably as soon as the bronze had arrived. Lysander eyed the remaining blades and picked up a rusted short sword. If they were going down into the tunnels, a smaller weapon would be easier to swing than Akiem's choice.

He tested the blade in his hand. Too heavy for its size and the balance was off. Still, it was better than nothing. "I don't believe Carline will hurt us."

Akiem straightened and winced, clutching at his side. The smell of blood tainted the air, wounds Dokul had inflicted upon him had reopened. "Why?" he asked. "Because she was always kind to us? What choice do you think she had in that? She's metal. All they know is destruction."

Lysander wasn't buying it. Carline had always helped him, sometimes in ways she tried to hide, or believed he didn't notice. Sometimes when he didn't want help. But in the turbulence of his life, she'd been a steadying hand. "But she's Carline... she's spent more time healing both of us than hurting us."

Akiem set the sword against a table and opened his jacket, bloody fingers slipping on the fastenings. "Elisandra had her controlled with that

gem. We were her ticket to getting free. Stop looking for the good among us, brother, it'll get you killed."

Like it did Amalia. Akiem lifted his shirt, revealing a latticework of cuts and deep, oozing gashes. Dokul had sliced him over and over.

Akiem peered through his lashes at Lysander, conveying a query and disgust in one glance, as only amethyst could.

Lysander sighed, tucked his blade hilt first against his lower back, and pressed both hands to Akiem's lower waist and over his ribs where the worst of the wounds pulsed blood. He didn't speak. There was little to say. Akiem had tossed him in the dungeon knowing what Mirann would do to him and Lysander hated him for that. Hated him for a lot more than that. But in all the times Elisandra had unleashed her wrath, Akiem had been there afterward, not to comfort, his brother wasn't capable of such things, but as company.

Lysander breathed out and awoke the strange, warming sensation near the middle of his chest, the area he tapped into when he'd helped heal Eroan alongside Carline. As a kit, he'd learned early on not to mention his healing skills. To do so only invited the whip and his talents weren't anything as strong as Carline's. "She said she'd fix my wing," he said softly, letting the tingling warmth soak through his shoulders and down his arms, through both palms and into Akiem.

Akiem's eyes fluttered closed. "She lied," he hissed through his teeth.

"I don't believe that." Lysander focused on the cuts and moved his fingers through the blood, stimulating the skin to repair itself.

"Nothing can fix your wing." Akiem growled, riding out the pain. "We must leave the tower and regroup with amethyst. We'll fly north..." Realizing his mistake, he opened his eyes and trailed off.

"The dragons to the north are rabid," Lysander said, ignoring the slip. There would be no flying anywhere for him and to be carried would be shameful. Dokul had carried him and he preferred never to experience that again. "And ferocious." He'd spent much of his life dealing with those wild dragons—creatures that had spent so long as dragon they had forgotten how to reason.

Wiping the blood aside, Lysander skimmed his fingers along pink and raw freshly healed wounds. "You'll have scars."

"We'll take the tunnels," Akiem said, yanking his shirt down. "It's a maze but we won't be stopped. There's no other way out."

... *for me*. There was for Akiem. All he had to do was shift and fly.

Wiping his bloody hands on his trousers, Lysander stepped back, and waited for Akiem to fasten his jacket. "Why don't you just leave me here?"

Akiem's dark-eyed glance stubbornly revealed nothing. He scooped up his sword. "We leave together now, or not at all."

He wasn't by Lysander's side out of some newfound brotherly love. Such things didn't exist.

"Why did Mother fear emeralds?" Lysander asked, following Akiem down another spiral staircase.

"She never told me," he replied, gaze shifting. Another lie.

Akiem wanted whatever Lysander was, so did Dokul and Mirann. All Lysander had to do was figure out what he was before that happened.

Rumbling sounds of distant roars trembled through the walls. Akiem left the armory and Lysander followed, silently vowing to get the answers he needed from him before his own ignorance got him killed.

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CHAPTER 49



Eroan

WHEN THE GROWLS grew vocal and the number of fleeing dragons increased, Eroan gave the order to deploy the first canister. Rolling clouds of gas filled the narrow tunnels, funneling upward, driven by the drafting air. After checking their masks filtered efficiently, he waved his pride on. Moments later, the gloom revealed its first trail of unconscious bodies. The pride went to work on the sleeping dragons, killing with cold efficiency. A slash to the throat, a blade in the heart.

Eroan led from the front, checking the faces of the fallen weren't any he recognized, and praying each time a body loomed out of the haze it wouldn't be Lysander's.

If the other prides were having the same level of success, they'd kill hundreds. The gas worked. The dragons were dying. This was the affirmation he'd needed.

Body after body after body they left bleeding in their wake, and with each new kill, the taste of vengeance sweetened Eroan's tongue.

When the tunnel widened and split, Eroan took a canister and split the pride in two, sending the other team off, leaving Seraph with him. If she was at all fazed by their actions, her face behind the mask showed no signs of it. When the gas thinned, Eroan grasped the remaining canister in one

hand, thumb poised on the release, and his sword in the other, and pushed deeper into the tower.

Splatters of cooling dragon-blood plastered his clothes against his skin. Seraph's clothes were dark with it too, evidence that this was right. The thirst for vengeance fueled him. For the hours spent chained by the wrists, for every cut he'd suffered, every lash of the whip, every indignity. His only regret was that Nye wouldn't be a part of this.

"Eroan?" Seraph whispered, gaze dropping to the canister.

"Soon," he replied, voice muffled by the mask.

The tunnels turned to stone, lit only by flame torches. Dragon roars came few and far between now. Eroan had been dragged through corridors just like this one, barely conscious, his back turned to shreds beneath Lysander's whiplashes. The memories tried to dig in and distract him from his purpose. Those memories had controlled him once, but not anymore.

"Eroan, now?"

"Soon, Seraph."

Deeper. He needed to get deeper inside, to find their beating bloody heart, to strike a blow they'd never recover from.

Rapid footfalls sounded from the staircase ahead. Eroan crouched. Seraph followed. The sight of the male with one red eye struck at Eroan's mind and lodged there. The male's snarl—the same one that had been pressed against Eroan's cheek—the dagger in his hand—the same that had left its permanent marks on Eroan's chest and thighs.

"Now!" Seraph yelled.

No. He would not kill this one as he lay sleeping.

Eroan dropped the canister, unopened, and lunged, startling the dragon back against the wall. Their blades locked. The beast of a male rolled his eyes upward, hissing behind his teeth until his gaze landed on Eroan's face.

Eroan tore his mask off. "*Remember me?*"

Red-Eye laughed his thick, liquid laughter. Madness clutched at Eroan's mind. Seraph was screaming at him to put the mask back on. He didn't listen. Didn't care. Couldn't think of anything outside of butchering this beast.

Pouring all of his trembling rage into his arms, he used his sword to force the male's little dagger back against his own throat. And Red-Eye still laughed.

Eroan pulled his sword away and clamped his fingers around Red-Eye's throat, needing to feel the dragon's life pass beneath his grip. Red-Eye tried to twist his blade around and slash at Eroan's neck. Eroan brought the dragon-teeth blade back up, slicing into the dragon's wrist, driving his arm back against the wall until the blade was so far embedded in the male's flesh it butted against bone.

Still the bastard laughed.

"Hello, pretty elf." His thick, wet tongue darted across his lower lip, a tongue Eroan could feel now, its cool trail branding him.

He stole the dragon's little blade from his twitching partly severed hand, keeping him pinned with the sword, and thrust that tiny blade into the male's gut. Red-Eye gurgled and spat, his smile slowly fading. *Die*. Eroan wasn't done. He jerked the little knife up, opening a line in the male's belly, exposing his blood-soaked insides to the air.

"Feels good, doesn't it..." Red-Eye wheezed, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth.

Eroan pulled the knife free and stabbed it once between the male's ribs, punching it as deep as the hilt allowed. Red-Eye jerked. Blood bubbled. Eroan stabbed again. And again. And again, until long after the bloody mass had stopped moving. But he still heard the laughter, still recalled the feel of his fat, wet tongue on his body. It wasn't enough. Red-Eye was dead but he needed *more*. He needed them all dead.

"Eroan...?" Seraph's voice found him through the madness. "He's dead... Eroan? Please... stop."

The sound of his own ragged breaths seemed like the only noise in the world. He tasted blood and licked it from his lips. Dragon-blood. And now Red-Eye was inside him. He recoiled, dropping the body, stumbling as he tried to extract himself from the male's slumped carcass, falling against the opposite wall. But it wasn't far enough away. Red-Eye's body still sneered at him, even in death. And now he couldn't escape the taste of him, the smell of him.

Blood.

So much blood. But not his. Not this time. He wasn't hurt, not on the outside.

Seraph was in front of him suddenly, blocking the view of the mess he'd made of Red-Eye. Dark blood crept around her boots toward Eroan. If it touched him, he'd drown in it.

“Eroan, look at me...”

He lifted Red-Eye’s knife and felt old wounds sting, as though the sight of the blade reopened them all. The cool drag of its edge had roamed his body, finding muscle to carve and skin to slice. He wanted to drop the knife but couldn’t let go. His breaths came too fast, his body riddled with fear.

Seraph snatched the dagger from his hand and tossed it down the corridor. “Hey! Don’t you disappear on me!” Her little hands bracketed his face. “We have a job to do. We’re Assassins of the Order. We’re here until it is done.”

Born in Alumn’s maelstrom, forged in the fires of Ifreann. Yes. He knew who he was. He spat out the taste of blood, and panting, reorganized his thoughts around Seraph’s fierce orders. The mission was all. He could fall apart afterward. Not now. *Until it is done.* “I’m here...”

“Good.” She handed him the blood-soaked mask. “I don’t think it’s any good.”

He dropped it in the blood and pushed on, heading up the stairs.

“Eroan... stop... wait. The mask... Wait, let me get the gas canister...”

Her voice trailed off behind him. He didn’t need the gas. He didn’t need a damned mask hiding his face. The dragons needed to see who it was delivering them the deaths they deserved. He had his sword and enough vengeance burning through his veins to kill every last one in this wretched tower.

Up and up the stairs spiraled until they spat him out in a corridor, divided by more corridors leading off, and there, at the junction, stood the dragon king, his face startled, and his princely brother: Lysander.

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CHAPTER 50



Lysander

THE ELF that appeared from the stairs ahead like a fucking omen was painted in dragon-blood. So much of it, in fact, Lysander didn't recognize him until he got to the eyes. Those vengeance filled eyes could only be Eroan's. The elation at seeing him quickly collapsed as Akiem lifted his sword and freed a warning growl. "You!" Akiem snarled.

Eroan started forward. "There is a trail of dead dragons behind me." He brought his sword up. "And I'll not rest until you're among them."

"Akiem, no..." Lysander grabbed his brother's arm. "There's no time!"

Eroan was still coming. Lysander shoved Akiem toward the nearest corridor branching off and blocked his brother's view of Eroan. "Go before the metals find us. This is not the time to settle scores..."

Eroan would try to kill Akiem, might even succeed. But Lysander needed answers from his brother. Akiem could not die here.

Akiem searched Lysander's face then threw the elf a parting growl before ducking out of sight into the corridor.

A blur of movement dashed after him. Lysander thrust out an arm and blocked Eroan, narrowly missed getting a sword in his gut when Eroan turned on him, eyes blazing with the killing lust.

Lysander grappled with Eroan's sword hand, angling the blade away. The grip was messy and when Eroan's first swung in, it caught Lysander

across the jaw. He stumbled, losing his grip on Eroan's arm. "Damn it, elf, stop."

"Stop?" Eroan shoved, forcing distance between them. "He ordered my torture!" Eroan loomed, his face twisted by rage. "He burned my home, killing my people! Because of him, Xena died. I'll not *stop*, not even for you."

Lysander offered a placating hand, trying to tame the wildness. "Just... not yet. I need him."

A second elf emerged from the stairs, drawing Lysander's eye, and in that moment divided between two killers, Eroan bolted after Akiem.

Seraph pulled her face mask down. "You won't stop him."

"I have to try." He eyed the canister in her hand, the blood splatters on her face. They had not come to save him, he realized. Not this time. They'd come to kill. "Are you going to kill me, elf?"

Her brow pinched, and with that infamous elven confidence she swaggered up to him, chin up, but still a foot shorter than him. "Are you going to make me?"

He huffed a soft laugh. "It's good to see you too."

The hard line of her mouth softened. "If you need your brother alive, we'd better try to stop Eroan."

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CHAPTER 51



E_{roan}

EROAN TRACKED the dragon by scent, following the trail back down, where the walls turned to thick rock and the torches became few and far between. As a chill tried to seep into his bones, he stopped and listened. A few pebbles skittered somewhere up ahead. Water dripped. Flame torches fought against the gloom, creating pockets of light in the widening tunnel. It felt like a trap.

He tightened his grip on the sword. Dried blood flaked off his hand. Some of it had itched his face, tightening his cheek and forehead. He planned to be the last thing Akiem saw in life and then perhaps he'd earn the title of dragon-killer for his skills as an assassin instead of just for surviving. *Kill the king.*

Eroan pushed on, easing around the torchlight, keeping to the shadows, his footfalls silent. Akiem was here. Lying in wait. Akiem wasn't the type to flee. The only reason he'd left that corridor was to lure Eroan into the dark.

Something rumbled behind the walls, the sound so deep it sounded like it came from the earth itself. Eroan pushed on. The tunnel was still too small for Akiem to shift into.

The king lunged from the shadows to Eroan's left. Eroan thrust his dragonblade upward, blocking Akiem's swing, swords ringing. The force of

the dragon's attack drove Eroan back, almost knocking him off his feet. He countered, planting his feet to steady his stance, and ducked to the side as Akiem swung again. His left fist crunched against Akiem's already bruised jaw, staggering the king back and opening an opportunity to drive the blade through his chest.

Eroan brought the sword in. Akiem's hand flashed. Dust burst in Eroan's face, eyes suddenly blurred and hot. Blinded, he brought his sword up as a barrier. Akiem's blade clashed against his, the force too much to bear. Eroan lost his footing, stumbled back, and went down hard.

"The infamous Eroan Ilanea." Akiem's voice rattled around the tunnel, echoing far into the darkness. "It all started the moment you showed up, planting ideas in my brother's head. Had I ordered your death instead of your torture, we would not be here now."

Eroan twisted, desperately blinking grit from his eyes. The tunnel was a blur of dancing torchlight and shadows. He got to his knees, aware Akiem's blade could sink into his back or be drawn across his throat at any time. If he could just see... the dragon was wounded or weakened, there would not be another chance to kill him. It had to be now.

Eroan swallowed, tasting blood and dirt. A dark figure filled his vision. His focus cleared. Akiem's details sharpened. Blood stained his gaping shirt and smeared his cold face. And he waited, holding back instead of finishing Eroan.

Eroan pushed himself back onto unsteady feet and tried to slow his panting.

"How did you do it?" Akiem asked, his sneer turning sharp. "How did you get inside my brother's head?"

Eroan wiped at his eyes. "I had nothing to do with—"

Akiem struck, as fast as a snake-bite.. Eroan ducked, shoved Akiem behind him and shoved the blunt end of the sword handle deep into the male's lower back. The king's pained grunt told him he'd landed somewhere wounded or vital.

Akiem turned, teeth bared, but now he bent a little, leaning into his pain. "I looked for the amethyst stone for weeks. You stole it, didn't you?"

"What happened up there?" Eroan nodded toward a ceiling he couldn't see in the dark. "Did Dokul finally claim your throne?" Anger burned in Akiem's brightening eyes, just as Eroan knew it would. "Without

Elisandra's gem, you were too weak to stay king. Is that what you're all running from?"

The growl rising from Akiem's human form rumbled so deeply Eroan felt the air tremble.

"I knew it had power enough to shore up Elisandra's reign. There had to be a reason you all followed her, a reason Dokul knelt to her."

Akiem's mouth twitched around a shallow, predatory smile. "It wasn't power. It was what the gem contained. And now it's free... you helped do that, Eroan Ilanea. How does it feel to know you freed the great gold?"

Eroan narrowed his eyes, the words too impossible to be true. "Lies."

Akiem charged, bringing his sword up to clash with Eroan's, driving Eroan back. The force of the dragon's attacks shuddered through Eroan's bones, swords chiming over and over. Metal sang. Akiem fought differently than Lysander. Lighter, faster, he moved and slashed as fast and as ruthless as any assassin.

Only one of them would walk away from this. Eroan's mind focused, thoughts thinning to a single point. The dragon king would die here. That was his fate.

Akiem's swing went wide, skipping off the tip of Eroan's blade. He tried to dart away but wasn't fast enough. Eroan's blade sliced across Akiem's back, ripping a cry from Akiem's lips, dropping him to his knees.

"Eroan!" Lysander's shout tugged at Eroan's focus but he would not be stopped.

Eroan pressed the dragonblade's tip to the nape of Akiem's neck. One swing, and the sword would sever his spine. No dragon could shift out of that. This was right. He was *made* for this. *Alumn, lend me the strength to see this through.* "You were dead the moment you ordered me tortured." He lifted the blade, ready for the final downward swing.

"Don't." Lysander ordered. The word spoken so close beside Eroan's ear it was almost intimate. A cool, metal hardness dug into Eroan's lower back. Lysander wouldn't...?

Eroan held his sword aloft. If Lysander did push his blade home, it wouldn't be enough to save his brother. Akiem would still die here.

"Don't make me hurt you." Lysander whispered this time. The words fluttered against Eroan's neck, stirring desire among his thirst for vengeance. "You've killed enough dragons today." The words stroked over

Eroan's jaw like Lysander's fingers had when they'd spent the night beneath the stars.

"It'll never be enough." Eroan brought the sword down.

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CHAPTER 52



Lysander

THE SWORD SWUNG DOWNWARD. Lysander had a single moment in which to decide who to save. He needed Akiem's answers, but he needed Eroan more, like he needed to breathe. The blade sailed downward, and Lysander let it happen.

But Akiem moved too, faster than seemed possible. He dodged at the last second, throwing Eroan off-balance and in that second between letting one live and the other die, Akiem twisted, fell back, thrust his sword up...

He saw it happen, saw it play out in his head and knew Akiem's strike would be fatal. The blade would plunge into Eroan and that couldn't happen.

He shoved Eroan aside. An easy thing to do with the elf off-balanced. But in doing so, Akiem's blade found another target.

The hard tip punched in below Lysander's last right rib, and thrust upward, through something vital that stole the breath right out of his body. The cold blade went on and snicked that warm spot beside his heart—the guarded, fragile part of him he tapped into to heal.

It didn't hurt.

Looking down to see a sword sticking from his chest, he figured it *should* hurt. The fact it didn't was probably bad.

He dropped his rusted blade and wrapped a shaking hand around Akiem's sword handle. Maybe if he could just pull it out...that would make everything better? The sword blurred and so did Akiem's pale, shock-ridden face. Lysander should have been breathing somewhere in all of this, but his body didn't seem to know how. He wobbled backward, thoughts suddenly hard to hold on to.

"Take it out!" Seraph screeched.

He didn't like the fear in her voice.

"He'll bleed to death in minutes..." Eroan, always the voice of reason.

The sword moved, slipping free easier than it went in, with a messy wet gasp of its own. Akiem was all Lysander could see suddenly. His dark eyes shone too brightly, but those couldn't be tears. Not for Lysander.

"Shift, brother," Akiem urged, or was he pleading? It was difficult to know with the ringing in Lysander's ears.

Shift. Right. That might help. The magic would put the wound somewhere else. But Lysander knew wounds. He'd carried enough of them. This one was different. The upward thrust had struck a part of him that couldn't be changed and shifted, the constant at his center, where the magic lived, where his power was rooted, the part that made him dragon.

A roar shattered the air, sounding close by. One Lysander knew well. Dokul. More stone and rocks fell from the ceiling, the weight of the noise upsetting the tower foundations. The whole place was fracturing, coming undone around him. Maybe he could just rest his eyes a moment while that happened.

Akiem's steely fingers dug into Lysander's shoulder. But when he opened his eyes, it wasn't Akiem looking back at him, but Eroan, face bloody, eyes cold and mouth grim. Lysander had an urge to wipe the blood off Eroan's cheek, to see the male beneath all of the mistakes between them. "I'm sorry...." He tasted blood in his mouth, felt it, warm and metallic on his tongue.

Eroan's sculpted face began to break. "Don't be sorry. Shift."

Shift... like it was so easy a thing. Sleep first. Shift later.

"I didn't save your dragon ass a world away so you can die in this hole now."

Fingers dug in both his shoulders and shook, rattling the broken thoughts around his head.

"Shift and fight, you need to fight."

“...tired... of fighting...” He could die here, he realized. But here smelled like freedom and he couldn’t think of anywhere else he’d prefer to enter the forever sleep. Only now it was cold and it hadn’t been moments before. Some distant voice told him the cold was a very bad thing.

Eroan’s cheek on his felt warm and soft. “Don’t let them beat you. Live, Lysander. Live, for me. Shift now... Alumn, please let him *live*.”

The stars were nice tonight, the forest quiet. He could lay in this elf’s arms forever. He didn’t have to fight anymore. He closed his eyes.

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CHAPTER 53



Eroan

HE WASN'T DYING. Eroan wouldn't allow it. There had to be a way to force him to shift before it was too late.

More dragon roars shook the tower. Chunks of ceiling thumped to the ground. They didn't have long before the entire place came down. Eroan pulled Lysander's limp body close, only to see Seraph's stricken face and behind her, the beast who had done this. "Make him shift," he demanded.

Akiem's wracked face gave his answer.

Seraph was on the king suddenly, her small dragon-teeth blade at his throat. "You make him shift or you're dying alongside him!"

"Shifting takes energy," Akiem said. "It's not something easily done when conscious. Unconscious, it's impossible. He's..."

"Dying? Say it, because that's what's happening to your brother, you sack of horse shit." Seraph's blade nicked the king's neck. "I should kill you now."

"I didn't want this! If he hadn't saved *you*—" He glared at Eroan. "It's your fault! Why does he keep saving you? Why won't you die like elves should?!"

A huge section of ceiling collapsed, thundering to the ground to Eroan's right, tossing up grit and dust. Behind it he heard the rumbling of a dragon's throaty growl. Too late, they had to move now.

Eroan heaved Lysander over his shoulders, bearing his limp, unwieldy weight, and followed Seraph's retreat over fallen stone, through narrow gulleys, and deeper into the tunnel network.

Akiem darted ahead. "This way..."

"Why should we trust you?" Seraph demanded.

"You shouldn't. But I no more want to be here than you do."

He led them out of the maze into too-bright daylight and a blue sky dotted with warring dragons. Globules of flame simmered on the ash-strewn ground. Eroan followed Akiem until he caught sight of his own people fleeing toward the tree line. "Go with them," he told Seraph.

She didn't answer and he didn't bother telling her again. Akiem led them into the tree cover just as two world-shattering roars filled the air and ground, sinking into Eroan's bones. He set Lysander down, cradled by tree roots, and tried not to linger on how white Lysander's skin was and how blue his lips were in daylight. *He's dying.*

Two dragons tore from within the tower walls, taking flight as rock and stone collapsed around them. Gold and Bronze. They beat enormous shimmering wings, rising higher, dwarfing every other dragon in the sky.

"Alumn save us..." Eroan breathed. Akiem had been right. The gold lived.

The metals fixed their sights on the string of elves and humans making their way back into the trees and dove toward them.

"They've seen them," Eroan whispered. The Order elves would know to go to ground to protect Cheen, but would the humans remember?

"Your village is close," Akiem said, tone unreadable. He stood safely within tree cover but off to the side, as still and unreadable as rock.

"What of it?" Seraph snapped.

Akiem's expression shadowed. He glanced at Lysander and those shadows deepened. He breathed in, something decided, then left the tree cover, walking out onto the exposed barrenlands. The shift took away the man, tearing the body apart and remaking him into the unmistakable black-winged monster. In crisp daylight, his black scales rippled with a deep purple. He spread his wings and beat into the air, heading straight for the two metals. Akiem was no small dragon, but the two metals made him seem no larger than a kit, and when he reared up in front of their path, unleashing a wall of flame on them, they knocked him aside as though he were no more to them than a fly.

“It’s not enough.” Eroan closed his eyes, unable to watch the bronze tear into Akiem, but that didn’t stop the screeches from piercing his ears. “I have to stop the prides returning to Cheen ...” He looked at Lysander. “I have to leave him.”

Seraph bit into her lip and nodded. “I’ll stay. He won’t go alone into Alumn’s garden.”

Eroan knelt at Lysander’s side. He still breathed, his chest above the terrible wound still rose and fell, but it wouldn’t be long now. All the things he’d wanted to say and all the moments he’d hoped they’d one day get together... All of that was gone now.

Eroan clasped Lysander’s face in both hands and pressed his forehead to his. “Rest now, brave prince. The battle is over for you. May Alumn’s light guide you home.”

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CHAPTER 54



Lysander

LIGHT. No, not light. Silver. He wasn't sure how he knew the difference, both shone so brightly it hurt his eyes, but the light was definitely silvery, like sun on water or snow. He smelled dragon and metal, and blood, and his own spilled insides. *Not good.* The light pulsed a warm and forgiving embrace, but it wasn't meant for him. Not yet, anyway. Two solid black eyes pierced the light, like tunnels leading into the dark. Then the beast spread its wings and the light became too much, it burned and boiled his skin from his bones, made him want to tear himself apart to stop the pain. It scorched his very soul, to the heart of him where Akiem's sword had found its mark. Until he realized this wasn't pain, not like physical pain. It was the same raw power he used to shift, the same power he'd sometimes molded to do his bidding. And gods he needed it. Grabbing a hold of that power, he let it in, let it roll through him and take him over until he filled his lungs with air and freed a roar.

Blinking dragon-eyes open, into daylight, he searched for the silver dragon, but she was gone, if she'd even been real to begin with. The barrenlands smoked. Where the tower should be, a smoking pile of rubble and clouds of dust remained. And above, countless dark wings stroked blue skies.

This wasn't death, it was real. And it was now.

Akiem was in the skies, he realized. Shredded wings rapidly beating to keep himself aloft. Dokul slashed and bit. One well-aimed strike would snap Akiem's neck. Lysander stretched one wing, his good wing, then tried the other, only to wince and clamp it closed again as twisted bones ground together. He could do nothing for Akiem, and given how his brother had almost killed him, he didn't linger on caring.

The gold—Carline—had broken off and headed straight for the trees, single-minded focus in her eyes. Dokul swept Akiem aside and dove in too.

Lysander glanced at the little elf standing by his foreleg, gawking up at him, her eyes wide with awe. Seraph. She was safe here. He snorted, blasting her back, and tore from the tree cover, galloping over rough ground toward the fleeing line of humans and elves. There were few amethyst left and too many bronze. This battle was over, but not before he stopped Dokul.

He spread his one good wing between the fleeing people and the dragons diving for him, making himself bigger, shielding their retreat. Hunkered low, hiding how he churned fire low in his throat, he watched the enormous world-ending beasts soar ever-closer. The wound in his chest throbbed and beat out its protest. By rights he shouldn't even be alive, but as dragon, he'd dealt with far worse pains. And likely would again soon.

The humans and elves squawked their warnings behind him. Some distant part of him registered how they could attack him from behind. His crown was exposed. But if they killed him, they'd all die. Hopefully they saw that.

He swung toward Carline's arrow-like descent, reared up on his hind legs, stretched his wing, and freed the savage, thirsty fire, blasting a boiling wave of flame skyward.

Carline pulled up, her golden wings beating the air, whipping up storms of fire, ash, and dust. Old, shrewd eyes assessed him. The same eyes had always appraised him through the years. Watching, teaching, guarding. She knew him, even now, and Akiem was wrong, that look in her eyes didn't mean him harm.

Lysander bared his teeth and bubbled a warning growl, flaring his crown. *These people are mine.*

He was counting on the fact he knew her, and knew she wouldn't fight him, despite being twice his size and more than capable of knocking him aside to devastate the fleeing elves.

Carline hovered, considering, then Dokul flew in like a damned landslide, slamming into Lysander's chest, plowing him back through a hundred feet of snapping trees and digging him into the ground.

Dirt and branches rained over them.

Dokul's teeth clamped around Lysander's foreleg and shook, yanking the limb from side to side. Searing pain tried to force Lysander to his belly, but he knew pain, knew how to manage it, use it. Pain was not his master. He snapped at Dokul, clapping his teeth together inches from the male's flared snout. Then Akiem's wall of black scales towered behind Dokul, his massive jaws clamped around the back of Dokul's neck, below the crown. Dokul threw his head back, trying to protect that vulnerable spot, exposing his throat. Lysander lunged and sank his teeth into sinew and scale. Dokul's hot blood flowed over his tongue. He bit harder. Bone and muscle crunched. *Die*. He pulled, trying to rip out the beast's throat. But whatever grace Lysander had with Carline, he'd reached its limit.

Claws raked at Lysander's back, snagging on his broken wing, pouring a flash of mind-numbing agony through his thoughts. Lysander roared his hurt, releasing Dokul.

The bronze chief rolled back, crushing Akiem beneath his bulk, but he did not retreat. Lysander stared at the two ancient metals. An impossible fight. He would not win. But that had never stopped him before.

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CHAPTER 55



Eroan

HE HAD NEVER EXPECTED to see green scales again, and never expected to see Lysander as dragon throw himself in front of the incoming wave of metal monsters.

“Go, go, go!” Eroan ordered, running with his pride through the trees. A sudden blast behind him uprooted his feet and threw him to the ground, partially burying him in snapped branches and dirt. He hauled himself out of the debris to the sight and sounds of Dokul and Lysander locked in battle on the ground.

He scanned the flattened impact site. By Alumn’s luck, none of his pride had been caught in the collision. Most had already fled into the trees and vanished, but several of the Order hung back, including Trey, waiting for Eroan’s order.

Eroan’s place was among his people. He should turn and flee into the trees. But Lysander continued fighting, even now, outnumbered and outmatched.

Eroan palmed the sword. “I’m not leaving him!” he shouted over the thunderous roars. “Go!” he told the elves. “This is not your fight.”

The assassins, each clasping their own blades, glanced among themselves. Eroan knew them like he knew all of the Order. They were each

as fierce and driven as the blades in their hands. Their place was with the Order, with their people. Not with him.

“I said go!” he snapped. There was no use in all of them getting banished for his loyalty to a dragon.

They melted into the shadows.

As soon as he was sure they were gone, Eroan stared at the scene unfolding before him. Akiem had joined the brawl, tearing into Dokul from behind while Lysander attacked from the front, still partially pinned on his back in the dirt. The sight of the gold towered over all three, its shimmering wings spread as it observed the chaos. Its golden scales glowed like the sun.

Eroan snuck closer, keeping to the tree line to stay hidden. The chances of him helping were slim but at least if he was here, he’d do what he was able to. He’d told Lysander he’d never give up on him. He had no intention of breaking that vow.

Movement from across the crater in the earth caught Eroan’s eye. Seraph waved, lifted the last gas canister, grinned, and pointed at the savage battle.

She never ceased to surprise him.

They had one last shot.

He nodded and held up five fingers.

The dragons battled on. The gold lunged in to take a bite out of Lysander’s back, then it clawed at Dokul, locked in battle with both. There seemed to be no reason behind who attacked who. The ground shook with their battle. The air trembled.

Eroan dropped a finger. Four.

Seraph had to throw it right.

Three.

She couldn’t miss.

Two.

Dokul looked up. Bronze eyes narrowed on Eroan, their black snake-like slits thinning like two swords encased in amber.

One.

Seraph flicked open the canister, threw back her arm, and sent it in a huge arc, spewing gas among the dragons. The big metals breathed in clouds of the noxious air and hacked lungfulls of gas back up.

Eroan cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Lysander, shift!”

The emerald dragon whipped his head around, startled eyes fixing on Eroan, then Seraph. The gas-cloud threatened to engulf him, and those dragon-eyes widened farther, knowing the gas would render him unconscious. He'd need to trust Eroan to save him...

Lysander's outline blurred and collapsed, rolling into itself, packing the enormous beast away—appearing to vanish beneath the gold and bronze. A lazy breeze wafted the gas over those metals, clouding Eroan's view. But he heard their angered snorting, saw glimpses of scale, then the breeze whisked the gas away, leaving the gold and bronze dumbly staggered over their own feet. Not unconscious, but enough for Eroan to venture closer.

Eroan waved Seraph into the crater Lysander's earlier impact had caused. Akiem's black-scaled body lay motionless farther into the barrenlands. Not dead, Eroan saw how the beast's eyes rolled. Good. Akiem would die one day, beneath Eroan's blade, but not today, it seemed.

Lysander lay in the dirt, out cold. Eroan first searched for the terrible chest wound he'd been sure would kill him, finding it stuck closed and on its way to healing. "Help me with him." Seraph gripped Lysander and helped prop him between them. Stumbling over rock and upturned earth, they made it into the trees. Dragoncalls and snarls faded behind them.

They'd done it.

They'd gotten him out. Eroan had no idea what would happen from here, but he knew he'd keep Lysander safe.

An assassin blocked the path ahead.

Eroan lifted his gaze to Trey's stoic face. *No...* He'd almost made it.

Then the others were there, stepping out of the shadows, blades gleaming in the dappled light.

Eroan couldn't fight them all, and he couldn't ask Seraph to put her life on the line for him or Lysander. But he'd give his own life, he realized. Even if his chances of surviving his Order assassins were slim.

"I..." he began, but no words could make this right. Assassins of the Order did not save dragons.

He flicked his gaze over each of them, seeing so much of himself in their formidable line. They were not wrong to stop him. But that didn't make them right either.

Seraph looked to Eroan for a way out, but there was none.

Then, wordlessly, Trey stepped aside, opening the path ahead. The elven pride circled around, flanking Eroan and Seraph in a protective circle. A

knot formed in Eroan's throat, stealing words of gratitude.

He adjusted Lysander's weight between him and Seraph and continued on. Together with the Order assassins, they carried Lysander to safety.

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CHAPTER 56



Eroan

EROAN STOOD at the end of the elders' long table. Half the village had packed into the hall. Those who couldn't fit inside crowded around the doors outside. The humans were here, too. Chloe, Ben, and others.

The weight of the elven gazes landed on him like lead. He had devoted his entire life to keeping them safe. Every breath, he'd used to fight for them. But did any of that matter now he'd brought the dragon prince home?

Anye was seated at the center of the elders. She had mastered her emotions, but he knew what was coming.

Nye was here too.

The only person who wasn't, was Seraph, and only because he'd ordered her to stay with Lysander and stop anyone who tried to take him.

He lifted his chin. They'd given him time to wash off the blood and change his clothes. The killing lust stilled raced through him, the leather and lemon smell of Lysander still lingered about him. His body buzzed, his thoughts churned. This would not go well.

"Eroan Ilanea, what do you have to say in your defense?"

He wet his lips. "That dragon has done more for the people of this village than any of you." And there were the gasps. He welcomed them. What did he have to lose? "Exile me, if you want, but you'll have to remove

me yourselves. I will not go quietly. I've done nothing wrong and neither has Lysander."

"He's dragon," Anye said, like that accounted for all the sins of dragons everywhere.

"Yes, he is. The tower assault was a success. We didn't lose a single life. Had Lysander not delayed the gold and bronze, we'd be adding more ribbons to Alumn's tree. He wasn't going to win that fight, but he protected our prides from the dragons anyway. Every single one of us owes him their thanks, not prejudice and hatred." He made sure they all heard. If they were going to turf him out, then he'd leave them with the hard truth.

Shocked gasps and mutterings grated on Eroan's thoughts. He'd heard enough. This council was a farce. His people were hypocrites. "I told the humans of how elves are an honorable people, we are good people. Our ancestors may have lost us our compassion in the wars, but we kept our souls. I am proud to protect every life deserving of that protection, not just elven lives, but humans too, and any who deserve it. It is my duty as an Assassin of the Order to protect those who cannot protect themselves, including Lysander. Don't make me a liar."

"You are a liar." Nye's voice cut through the chitter. "You lied about how you found that tunnel. You lied about where you were the night before. The dragon prince is more to you than just another soul who needs saving. He's your lover."

Someone shouted a filthy insult. Someone else barked in Eroan's defense. The noise became too much to separate any one voice. Eroan stilled, listened to his heart thumping and let the collective crackle of anger wash over him.

Nye was right. "I lied," he raised his voice, "because at every turn, elves have refused to believe a dragon can do good. I lied because you wouldn't have allowed the mission had you known where the information came from. The fact remains, Lysander told me how to get inside the tower, and together, we won."

"You deceived the council," Anye replied, her quiet calm as sharp as Nye's accusations.

He was done holding his words back. Eroan slammed both hands against the table. "We killed fifteen hundred dragons inside that tower! With its collapse, the number is likely much higher. We struck a blow to the dragons like nothing they've seen since this war began! The amethyst have

scattered. As of today, the skies are empty of dragons. We won! All because of Lysander.”

Anye glared. “And now the gold has returned.”

He couldn’t argue that either. Alumn knew he had made mistakes, but Lysander wasn’t one of them. “I’m a long way from innocent, I understand that and I’m not denying it, but I’m also not asking for forgiveness. Lysander is not your enemy. If we are as honorable as we proclaim to be, we owe him a place among us.”

“You speak of the impossible,” The elder to Anye’s left said. “Eroan Ilanea, you will gather your belongings and leave Cheen at sunset.”

“No.” He straightened and eyed each of the elders in turn. “I will not.”

Anye’s brows pinched. “You’ll leave or I’ll order the assassins remove you.”

“I’m not leaving. I secured us the greatest victory in living memory. You need me to win this war.”

“Assassins of the Order,” Anye rose to her feet, “remove Eroan from this hall.”

Eroan waited for the scrape of chairs, for the hands to grip his arms and drag him away, but a new quiet had settled. Nobody moved.

“Assassins, you will follow my orders until a new sassa is chosen!”

Silence.

Eroan’s heart swelled, hope was a fragile, fluttering thing in his chest. His Order, his blade brothers and sisters, had not abandoned him.

A chair scraped. “I was there yesterday,” Trey said. “I saw the dragon block the metals. He stood alone, the chances of his survival slim. He was prepared to die there, for us, *for elves*.” Trey paused and let that reality soak into them all. “There is no other explanation for what he did. He gained nothing from that fight. But we did. We survived. If Eroan is to be exiled, then I’m leaving with him.”

Eroan opened his mouth to tell Trey to sit and not risk his future, when another voice spoke up. “If Eroan goes, so do I.” Eroan knew the speaker, an older female, quiet but reliable. The elf who had killed the dragon Nye and him had sheltered inside. Another Order assassin he respected. She nodded at his glance.

Another, “We owe the dragon a safe place to heal, at least. This could be an opportunity—”

Pride and relief constricted Eroan’s throat.

“Assassins of the Order have earned the right to speak for one of our own,” came another voice. “Eroan does not deserve to be exiled. The tower raid was a success.” Another, “I trust Eroan...” Another, “Eroan wouldn’t allow anything bad to stay among us.” More, “Curan said Eroan should lead...”

Anye’s face fell with every protest. She could not banish her entire Order. More and more voices joined the others. Eroan bit into his bottom lip and fought to keep a knot climbing his throat.

She lifted her hands and silenced the hall. “Very well,” Anye sighed. “I have always respected the way of the Order. You are our guardians. We owe you our lives and I have no wish to deny your voices. Eroan...”

He straightened.

“Your exile is withdrawn.”

Honor and pride warmed him through. *This* was change. This was progress. “And Lysander?”

Her wise eyes sharpened with threat. “The dragon is your responsibility. His life is in your hands, and yours in his. If he harms us, in any way, there will be worse consequences than exile.”

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CHAPTER 57



Lysander

THERE WAS an elf in a chair in a room made of wood. Lysander remembered being in this room before, remembered Eroan throwing a knife at his head, and remembered a whole lot more right after that. Eroan had been angry then, furious even. Now he looked smug, sprawled in that chair with a tempting smile pulling his mouth sideways.

Lysander shifted beneath the covers. Someone had tucked him in so tightly, he'd woken wondering if he was once again in chains. Plucking an arm free, he loosened the sheets and realized he'd been stripped to his undergarments. Had that been Eroan's doing? He couldn't imagine any other elf would want to get so close. Which meant Eroan had undressed him and he'd slept through it. What a crime that was. "There are easier ways to get me in your bed."

Eroan's smile ticked sideways.

Breathing in, Lysander shamelessly let the smell of pine and cut wood smooth out the creases in his thoughts. Was this what being safe felt like? He rubbed at his itchy eyes. "What was in that gas?"

"Human invention. It knocks out jeweled. Didn't work as well on the great metals though."

He tried to remember but all it brought back was a sensation of fury and pain. He winced and twisted onto his side, looking back at Eroan's curious

expression. “You saved me again, huh?”

One of Eroan’s eyebrows jumped. “How did you come back from certain death?”

He tried to think on that moment, but a jagged, silvery stab threatened to slice his skull open. Those memories weren’t ready to be examined. “Ask me again when I can think right. I save you, you save me... We must be even now?”

Eroan stood, and Lysander absorbed the seductive sight of him approaching. The sway of his narrow hips, the strength in those bare forearms—honed to swing blades—sleeves rolled up to just below his biceps. His typical leathers were gone, replaced with simple cotton trousers and a V-neck loose shirt. The plain clothes did nothing to soften his lethality. He still looked like he was either about to stab Lysander or kiss him. In Lysander’s weary state, he’d take either.

“I’ve lost count.” Eroan stopped by the bed, forcing Lysander to look up the tall length of him. A long blond braid hung over one shoulder, all neatly controlled. Lysander wanted to pull the band free and plunge his hands into that hair, and then maybe fall into a kiss that would likely get them both thrown out of this village.

Eroan’s gaze flicked down to where the little dragon token rested on its string in the hollow of Lysander’s throat. Lysander circled a hand around the gift. By diamonds, the things he’d said and done to Eroan.

Eroan’s eyebrow flicked higher. He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

“About... before,” Lysander began. “I... My behavior... the gem... I’m dragon—”

Eroan lunged, caught Lysander’s wrists, pinning them loosely to the pillow either side of Lysander’s head, and leaned in so close Lysander could see how Eroan’s blue eyes sparkled, reminding him of the endless ocean surface. “Did you know the stone was linked to the gold?” Eroan demanded in his hard, cold, assassin voice.

And just like that, Lysander was at the mercy of a dragon-killer. Maybe he *was* about to be stabbed? “No. I was told it could heal my wing. Apparently, being emerald means my own kin keep me in the dark. You probably know as much about that amethyst stone as I do.” He swallowed hard and studied Eroan’s quirked mouth. Its gentle, bow-like curve, so quick to harden or soften. He wanted to reach out and trace its line with a

fingertip and then, done with that, he'd replace his fingertip with the tip of his tongue and knew Eroan would open for him. Sparks of lust hardened his cock, and now that *that* part of him was awake, he couldn't ignore those thoughts and where they led him. Making his lashes heavy, he swept his tongue over his top lip, deliberately reminding Eroan exactly what he could do, and had done, with his tongue.

Eroan's sensual eyes grew sly. He switched his grip to hold Lysander's wrists with just one hand, then reached into a pocket and plucked out the firestarter, dangling it between them.

He must have left it at the fallen oak. "Keep it," Lysander said. "Call it a gift."

"You have much to make up for, *dragon*." Eroan tucked the firestarter away again. Both having a part of each other to carry with them seemed right.

"I have some ideas on how to make you pay..." The sly purr behind Eroan's words had Lysander's heart jumping. He lost control of his breathing and tried to lift his head to nip at Eroan's mouth. Eroan pulled back, narrowing his eyes as though he'd focused on his next kill.

Lysander swallowed, powerfully aroused. "Are your assassins going to burst in here and try to kill me?"

Eroan bowed his head. "Door's locked." He ran his tongue over Lysander's bottom lip. The soft wetness demanded to be answered, but Lysander held still. Eroan sucked. Drawing Lysander's lip between his teeth, and looking up, he peered through his lashes. "Anyone who wants to hurt you," he whispered, "has to go through me."

Lysander's breath caught, not from lust, but from the sudden, desperate feeling of holding on and never wanting to let go. This wild, impossible elf was looking at him as though he were his whole world. He'd never had that before, never felt *this* overwhelming sense of belonging. With anyone.

"I'm a bastard."

"Yes, you are."

And still Eroan looked at him like he was his whole world. After everything he'd done, after everything he *was*, this elf wouldn't quit on him. Ever.

All the iron armor he'd built around him cracked and fell away, freeing too much hurt for Lysander to do anything but pull his arms free of Eroan's grip and throw them around Eroan, clutching him close, holding him tight,

so damn afraid of how he'd almost lost the one good thing in his entire world. Eroan softened in his arms, accepting him like none other ever had. "*Why do you keep saving me?*" he whispered. Through all of this, Eroan hadn't answered that one simple question. Why save his enemy, why save a creature he was created to kill and keep on saving him, time and time again?

Eroan's hand tightened against his back, the touch spreading, like a warm claiming. "Because..." he said, "in the one place I expected to die, you gave me a reason to live."

"What reason?"

"You."

Eroan... cared? Not for getting ahead, not for some way of using him against the rest of the dragonkin, he just cared because he *liked* Lysander? Just a simple thing, and yet it broke Lysander's heart wide open. He pulled tighter, wracked with tremors. He hadn't felt this before and was afraid to let it go. Nobody had cared for him. From his first breath, he'd been alone. He'd fought for every second, tried to climb out of the dark, and he hadn't always won. He was dragon and he did not deserve someone like Eroan.

He should let Eroan go but couldn't. Not yet, maybe never. Besides, Eroan was too stubborn to leave. "You're the light in my dark." In the frantic need to be loved, he wasn't sure if he'd spoken aloud and found he didn't care if he had.

"You're safe..." Eroan whispered, holding him like he had when they'd both hidden in the ground.

Safe.

"What is this thing between us?"

Eroan had never answered. He didn't expect him to now.

Eroan shifted on the bed, still trapped in Lysander's arms but maneuvering so he could comfortably hold Lysander against his chest. Eroan's embrace felt more like home than any place he'd ever known. But he needed the answer from him. If this thing between them was nothing, he had to know now, before he fell too far.

Eroan's chin rubbed his head and when he spoke, his voice rumbled through Lysander. "It is everything."

He crushed Eroan's shirt in his fists, afraid to let go. He wanted so badly to believe him, wanted to be free to feel safe but this world would not tolerate what they shared.

He wasn't safe, not while Dokul was alive and hunting him, while Carline was restored as gold. And he doubted Eroan's people had suddenly warmed to the idea of having an amethyst among them. But he could pretend while wrapped in Eroan's arms, pretend this was how things would be from now on. It would never last, but he could dream, couldn't he? Dream of Eroan's light... light like the kind that had come to him in the darkest place, in a world of ice at the edge of death, when he'd fallen and finally hit the ground. That light harbored deep, black eyes, full of cold, and sharp, silver wings. And its name. He had heard its name moments before the silver dragon had sent him back to the living to change the world.

She was called Alumn.

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EPILOGUE



N_{ye}

A PAIR of yellow eyes glowed among the trees. Nye freed his daggers from his thigh sheaths and waited for the creature to slink closer. Her satin-like, hairless skin shimmered from head to toe. Dark lines accentuated dark eyes. Tarnished metal rings hung from her ears and wrists, and when she licked her lips, the campfire light caught the metal stud through her tongue. As she drew closer, the same firelight licked through her semi-transparent chainmail garments, stroking over her lean limbs and warming her swollen belly.

“Hello again, little elf.” She stroked her pregnant bump. “I had wondered if you’d make good on our deal or if I’d need to root you out among your little wooden huts. A mother has many mouths to feed and a village of elves will fill many bellies.”

The beasts in *her* belly would hatch to be elf killers. He should kill her and her developing eggs now before they had a chance to end any more elven lives but her cold, sly eyes watched him too closely. She’d see any attack coming before he could land it.

He hated this, that it had come to this, but clearly Eroan needed to be dealt with, cut out of the Order like a tumor before the cancer spread. Eroan *and* the dragon prince. He’d have preferred to dispatch the dragon prince

himself, but this bronze—Mirann, she'd told him her name—had taken that choice as soon as she'd toyed with him during the retreat from the tower.

"There has been a change," he said. Her eyes flared and a sharp dart of panic tried to weaken him. "They're not being exiled."

She stalked closer, seeming to grow taller in the firelight, her golden-metal dress alight with a fiery glow. "You promised me—"

He held out a hand, making her slow. "But... I can still get them to you. I just need..." He wet his lips. "A little more time, that's all... just a little more time. Nobody needs to die. This can still happen."

Mirann hesitated, and instead of closing the last few strides between him, she circled around the campfire, facing the flames. Embers drifted high. She extended her hand, disturbing the upward flowing embers. "You elves do realize the kind of dragon you harbor among you? He appears harmless, but his smiles are masks and his bite sharp. Lysander is as vicious as any in his hideous amethyst brood and just as cunning. Emerald dragons are feared among the dragonkin for a reason. He *will* turn on you. It is in his nature."

He believed every word. "I'll see to it he's cast out." Someone had to protect Cheen from Lysander, and from this bronze monster who clearly had the village in her sights. "Just... a little more time?" he asked again. It would be simple enough to turn the elves against Lysander. Eroan would be more difficult—he was still on the war council, still the Order leader—even after he'd attacked Nye—but not for much longer.

She looked down at her belly. "Time? I have a little time, elf. And I have Akiem to keep my father occupied, at least until he grows bored of him. Unfortunately for the amethyst prince, he is not Lysander." Her gaze soured. She captured an ember, turned toward Nye and set the glowing bit of dust free. It drifted between them, luring Nye into the spell of her beautiful glowing eyes. "But do not push your luck. If you fail, I'll come get my broodmate myself." Her teeth flashed behind a reptilian smile. "And you do not want that, little elf. Unless you want your precious ribbon-tree to burn?"

She knew of Alumn's sacred tree? Then she truly did know where Cheen was. He failed to hide his alarm, and with a wicked laugh she turned on her heel and strode back into the shadows.

Nye stared into the darkness long after she'd gone. Perhaps he shouldn't have tried to go after Eroan during the assault on the tower. If he hadn't, she

wouldn't have seen him, but she would have trapped another elf, someone she could terrify into doing her bidding. At least, like this, he would keep Cheen safe. This *Mirann* desperately wanted Lysander and he would give him to her.

All he had to do was hand over the dragon. And where the dragon went, so did Eroan.

Nye loved Eroan. Always had. Always would. Loved him enough to end his torment under Lysander's control.

The future was all on Nye, and by Alumn, he would not fail like Eroan had.

He lifted his gaze to the sky beyond the tree canopy, said a silent prayer to Alumn, kicked the fire over, and plunged back into the undergrowth, toward home.



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S U M M A R Y

An elven assassin. A dragon prince.
Three days they had together.
Three days was not enough.

There's a traitor among the elves. A traitor who will stop at nothing to see Eroan pay for the crime of loving a dragon, and Eroan Ilanea will pay with blood.

Lysander has never been free to choose his fate. That is about to change. Finally, he learns what it means to be emerald, but knowledge is power, and power whispers its seductive curse into the ear of a broken prince.

Elf and dragon.
Leaders, lovers, fighters.
Fates entwined.

But as the dragonkin rise under a new king, will Eroan and Lysander's boundless love save the world or destroy it forever?

CHAPTER 1



*A pocket full of ashes,
Fallen leaves on the ground,
Dragonfire, burning pyres,
And her light could not be found.*

~ Ashford archives.

*L*ysander

“THAT’S PICA, SHE’S NICE.” Seraph screwed up her nose. “Mostly nice, sometimes grouchy. Best to stay away from her.” She pointed through the hut window at the next group of elves to pass by. “Kallyn, Jibiha, and Dren. They’re hunters but they’re sort of the hunters you want at your back during a long night’s trek. They would have been assassins only they didn’t make the cut, you know?”

Lysander wasn’t sure if he knew, but he could imagine what she meant. The elves she’d singled out were stockier than most of the others he’d observed passing by the hut, like they routinely spent a few hours a day lifting felled trees for the fun. Heavier than Eroan, they’d be the kind of males Lysander would have recruited for his own flights, had they been dragons.

Seraph went on, singling out who to avoid and who was the least likely to try and stab Lysander in the back. Most Orders assassins were to be avoided at all costs, despite many of them having helped save Lysander when the dragon tower fell three days ago. Lysander listened, forgetting names but absorbing all he could when it came to navigating what could easily be his home for the next few weeks or months. He suspected elven society was trickier than dragon society. At least with dragons, if one intended to kill you, you knew about it. Here, all the elves wore smiles, even those who sharpened their dragontooth blades.

“Oh, there’s Janna!” A broad grin warmed Seraph’s animated face. “She’s really nice.” Lysander turned his attention to the female elf with green-tinged hair passing outside. Clearly heavy with child, she had slung a bow and quiver over her shoulder and looked as though she was heading out of the village to hunt.

“Her and Eroan are like this.” Seraph entwined her two little fingers.

Lysander frowned. “Like what?”

“Like this, see.” She wiggled her locked fingers, as though that would help clear up his confusion.

“I have no idea what that—” he mirrored the little-finger hooks “—means.”

“*Friends*, you dolt.” She chuckled but on seeing Lysander’s wary smile her laughter faded. “Don’t dragons have friends?” Her bright eyes saddened, making something hurt inside Lysander’s chest.

He pushed away from the window and drifted about the small hut. *Eroan’s* hut. After three days, he knew every inch of it. It smelled of cut wood and pine, of Eroan.

“She’s with Ross now. He’s okay, I guess,” Seraph continued. “She thought Eroan was dead when... you know... when he didn’t—”

“Yeah, I know.” Lysander had thought Eroan dead too. And then there had been a time Eroan had believed Lysander dead. They’d been through enough. It should have been enough, and yet Lysander couldn’t shake the feeling that what they had, this small pocket of calm, was just the breathless moment before it was all ripped away.

He trailed his fingers along the backs of the hand-made wooden chairs, along the tabletop and down the reed doors covering cupboards. Eroan had made it all, carved it and crafted it with his own hands, like the dragon pendant Lysander wore around his neck. He didn’t deserve all this. Three

days, and he knew this life couldn't be for him. But he wished it was. He wished it so hard when he waited for Eroan to return from his Order duties, afraid that this night, Eroan wouldn't return.

These walls. This place. He'd been in cages, been kept behind bars, both real and mental, but this village and these elves were a different kind of torture. It would end, like all good things ended, and he didn't think his battered heart could take it. The longer he stayed, the more he wanted to stay, and the more it would hurt when it was over.

"Have you seen Eroan?" he asked.

"I, er..." Seraph straightened and rubbed at her arm, "He's been really busy." She ran her fingers through her long hair and gathered it all over one shoulder, twisting it, giving her hands something to do. "The humans are still here and he feels he needs to be at the center of it all. You know how he is."

Lysander gave her a shallow smile. "It's fine. I know. His people need him." But Lysander needed him too, and although Eroan had returned every day, his visits were brief. He seemed... distant. Distracted. But maybe that was how things were here. Lysander didn't know how Eroan lived. He didn't know how any of them really lived their lives. He didn't know much about elves at all and being told to stay in the hut like a good pet dragon made the unknown just outside that door seem all the more tempting.

Seraph had seen where his gaze tracked. "It's for your own safety."

Sunlight from the window at her back draped over her, casting her long shadow across the floor. Dust motes silently swirled, and outside, elves laughed and chatted and did all the things elves did. Lysander ached to be out there too. He'd spent weeks, months inside Chloe's metal cage, but he hadn't wanted to be among the humans. He wanted to be among elves because knowing them meant he'd better know Eroan. But he was dragon. And most of the village wanted him dead, not living among them.

Seraph's gaze had dropped to where Lysander had curled his hands into fists at his sides. He relaxed them and casually leaned back against one of the counters Eroan used to prepare food.

"The assassins will kill you," Seraph said quietly. She came closer but stopped from getting too close, either afraid she'd say too much or afraid he'd ask more questions. "Some consented with you residing here but most..."

She was a good soul. But she didn't know how it felt being kept in the dark for a lifetime. "Maybe they should see they have nothing to fear. They can't see that while I'm in here."

"Give it a few more days."

A few more days? All of this wouldn't last. Maybe it would be over in a few more days. He didn't know *anything* and if it ended with him never knowing, it would tear him up inside.

He looked at the closed door. Not locked. He wasn't a prisoner. Eroan had made sure of that. So he could just walk out. Eroan wasn't here to stop him. Seraph could try but as feisty as she was, she wouldn't stop him. A part of her agreed with him, even if she didn't say it.

"Don't," she begged.

"Just a little look." He shoved from the counter and crossed the floor.

"It's not safe." She wasn't reaching for him. That was good. She'd let this happen.

"It's fine." Three strides. Just three strides to go. His heart raced. This was the right thing.

"It's not fine. You can't just say it's fine and have it be so—Lysander." Her tone pitched. "Don't. Please. I don't want you to get—"

He opened the door and walked into the sunlight.

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CHAPTER 2



Eroan

STIFLING heat thickened the air in the Order training house. Eroan could have ventilated it by opening all the doors and the few windows, but with summer just a few weeks away, the assassins currently performing a brutal routine needed to be able to function at their best in the heat as well as they did in the cold.

He paced their lines, inspecting each of Cheen's fifteen finest Order assassins, knowing his presence, crowding them close, was its own kind of test. Trey was here, his movements perfectly timed with the others of the pride. He hadn't long been an assassin, but he'd taken to it well. Nye stood at the front of the pride, where Curan had once stood, and watched them all as closely as Eroan. Nye had stepped-up as of late. He'd trained these individuals while Eroan had been busy with the humans and Cheen's elders. And Nye should be proud of them. Each was a fine example of an Order assassin. Each one was a blade, molded and hammered into the perfect weapon. Things were different now the tower had collapsed and the dragons scattered, but the changes made the dragons more unpredictable. It was Eroan's task to ensure the Order was ready for anything.

On and on, the Order elves performed each imaginary strike as though it would be their one and only chance to kill. Muscle gleamed under the house's torchlight. Precision and dedication shone in their eyes. Eroan

drifted to the back of the lines and watched their footwork. Perfect. He dared to consider that Nye was perhaps an even better teacher than he. The results spoke for themselves.

“We know your moves by heart.” A rich male voice purred from the entrance doorway behind Eroan. A cascade of emotions spilled through him, the first being lust, because he couldn’t get the dragon out of his head, but fear quickly smothered the heat when the parade of assassins tripped over their own feet and whirled on the intruder. One threw a dagger, so trained was she to strike at dragons.

Eroan whirled, following the blade’s trajectory.

Lysander neatly stepped aside, making the throw seem slow. The dagger sailed past him and strummed in the wall behind. He merely raised an eyebrow and tucked both hands into his pockets. Despite wearing the dark cottons and leathers of elven clothes, he was no more elf-like than the humans scattered about the village. But while Lysander looked human, he wasn’t that either. His edges were too defined, his eyes too dark, their emerald green too intense to be anything other than dragon.

“Was it something I said?” Lysander quipped, moving around the edges of the house. His attention skipped over the racks of Order weapons and drifted back to the pride of elves. Each one trained to kill *him*: Prince Lysander. The Dragon Queen’s son and once the most respected dragon in battle.

Eroan should speak, but he’d lost that ability. It was too late to tell Lysander to leave and the look on the dragon’s face suggested he wouldn’t obey anyway. He was enjoying this moment. His eyes sparkled with that odd kind of challenge, the one that said he knew he was walking a thin line, but he’d keep on stepping over it just to see how far he could push before the line broke.

“We learned long ago to watch for your signature swings,” Lysander continued. “Allow me to demonstrate,” he plucked a dagger from the rack, setting a murmur among the pride. “You open with your thrust and lead into an uppercut that I assume is meant to deflect.” He swept through the same moves the elves had all just been performing but made them slow and exaggerated. On dragon, the traditional elven moves gained their own graceful appeal. Strength radiated through his body, into his stance. “All you’re doing is broadcasting your intention to thrust in the gut and, I

suppose, disembowel us.” The dance finished, he straightened, eyes sparkling. “Has it ever worked?”

“That’s enough,” Nye said. “Eroan, remove your dragon from this sacred place before I do it myself.”

Eroan bristled at the tone. Nye did not have authority over him. But the situation was delicate. The Order elves, panting out their exhaustion, were poised on a knife’s edge. It would only take the slightest twitch to set them off. Eroan could not rein them all in and Lysander, for all his confidence, couldn’t fight them all either.

Lysander tossed the blade in the air and caught it. “I’d like to see you try.”

A dangerous determination came over Nye’s face. “Would you?”

Eroan’s heart stuttered and something cool and hard sank in his gut. Dread.

“Sure.” Lysander pointed the blade’s tip at Nye. “You got a coward’s hit on me while I was tied up. You won’t find me easy to beat on now.”

“You and I, *dragon*. Outside. Now!” Nye started forward and the elves broke rank, ready to spill from the Order house and watch their sassa fight a dragon one-to-one in Cheen’s village center.

“No,” Eroan said, calmly but firmly. The pride stopped. But Nye had already made it to within a step of Eroan. He snarled and met Eroan’s glare eye-to-eye.

“You’re afraid I’ll kill your...” Whatever Nye had been thinking to finish with, he kept it silently on his tongue and swung his glare at Lysander.

“Everyone out,” Eroan ordered.

The pride filtered through the doorway. Trey lingered, his gaze on Nye as though he were looking to convince him to back off, but he deferred to Eroan. Eroan nodded for him to leave. Nye hadn’t moved.

Lysander picked at his nails with the dagger, occasionally looking up, checking he was still the center of Nye’s attention before flashing a teasing smile.

“Stop it, Lysander,” Eroan growled low.

Some of the humorous light snuffed out of Lysander’s gaze. He huffed and stabbed the dagger into the house’s wall, then leaned against a table and folded his arms crossed, waiting.

Eroan reached for Nye's arm to steer him from the house. Nye jerked away and flung a barbed glance at Eroan. Rage was a cool and sharp glimmer in Nye's dark eyes. He left, slamming the door behind him. It rebounded open again and swung in the breeze.

"That *was* entertaining."

Eroan sighed, the tension finally faded with that breath. He rubbed at the new ache between his eyes and kept his gaze downcast. *Entertaining* would get Lysander killed. Did he not know the danger he was in?

"I wasn't wrong, though. You should switch-up your routines," Lysander went on. "My flights knew them so well they used to mock your graceful dances—"

Anger flashed through Eroan, fast and sharp. "Just stop!" By Alumn, could Lysander not see how close he had come to a dagger in the heart? None of this was amusing. It wasn't a game.

Hurt showed in Lysander's eyes. He looked down. "I was just trying to help."

Eroan felt that hurt like it was his own and now he wished he could take his outburst back. Tiredness frayed his nerves. That and fear. "Lysander... Many of my people will kill you given a chance. You can't walk into an Order house and pick up a blade. What were you thinking?"

The prince blinked up. "I asked an elf where to find you. They sent me here." He shrugged, like it was simple. He had just wandered through an elven village, a dragon among elves, like it was nothing.

One assassin. That's all it would have taken. A blade in the back and Eroan wouldn't have been able to save him. He'd watched Lysander die after Akiem had thrust a sword through him and he had no intention of ever allowing that to happen again. "How can you be so careless with your life?"

Lysander's tiny smile softened some more, but not enough. "Says the elf who routinely threw away his."

His words eased a little of Eroan's frustration. "You should not have left my hut. The people aren't ready to have you among them."

"They'll never be ready, and I'll not stay another day in that hut like some pet you sometimes tend to."

Eroan swallowed. "That's not..." Was that what Lysander truly thought? It had been mere days since the collapse of the tower. The humans had been staying among them; his duties had to come first. He could not indulge in

time with Lysander, despite wanting nothing more. “I’m trying to keep you safe.”

“That’s what Seraph said.” Lysander moved from the table and approached Eroan, but did it in that slow, predatory way that Eroan was only now becoming to recognize as a weakness of his own. He stood his ground while his heart thumped harder, racing his breath, until Lysander stopped too close in front of him, and yet not close enough. The heat from the dragon tried to wrap around Eroan and pull him in. The lemony bite tingled his lips and tongue, and with the dregs of adrenalin and fear in his veins from Lysander’s foolish introduction, his fingers twitched, aching to sink into this vision of masculine temptation.

“If you want to stop me from walking among your kin, you’ll have to tie me up.” Lysander leaned closer, so all Eroan could see was the glittering green of dragonsight in his jewel-like eyes. “And we both know you prefer to be bound.”

Lysander brushed away before Eroan could snatch at the opportunity to have him, and headed for the door, leaving Eroan breathless, trying to swallow around the sudden heated desire, a desire that had been building for days now.

“Wait.”

Lysander turned and leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, snaking sunbaked arms across his chest. How could it be this dragon was an impossible combination of being both pliable, like a liquid, and solid, like a stone. Eroan considered going to him, closing the door on the world outside and tasting every inch of his dragon in this, the most sacred of Order buildings. But if they were seen... The risk was too great, even if the thought alone had him adjusting his trousers to accommodate the evidence of his arousal.

Lysander’s eyebrow had arched again, and this time it had pulled the corner of his lips with it. He knew what his presence summoned in Eroan, but he couldn’t know how deep the feelings had rooted. Deeper than any other Eroan had experienced before. The thought of Lysander getting hurt, or killed, twisted Eroan’s emotions into knots that wouldn’t loosen. This connection between them was more than desire. It had been *more* for a long time and he would not see it destroyed by his peoples’ fear. But he could not stop Lysander either. The dragon prince was free now. Free to make his own choices, and that had to come before love. Didn’t it?

Eroan cleared his throat and distracted his mind and body by tidying the weapons. “If you must walk among my people, take Seraph.”

“I don’t need a tiny elf chaperone.”

“Clearly, you do.”

“What I need, Eroan Ilanea, is you.”

Eroan turned and caught a glimpse of the tail of Lysander’s long, braided hair slinking out the door.

He hadn’t thought to control the prince. That was the last thing he’d wanted after the life Lysander had endured, but if Lysander didn’t curb his confidence, an elf—likely Nye—would do it for him, and Eroan had no wish to see it come to that. But it had only been three days. They had time, didn’t they? Time to make this work. Time for his people to come around. Somehow.



A FLUTTER of fear shortened Eroan’s breath. He hadn’t seen Lysander since the Order hall, but Seraph had told him the dragon planned to invite himself to the spring fayre that evening—a fayre only Seraph could have told him about.

Eroan had planned to invite Lysander himself, but now, seeing Lysander standing at the fringes of the village gathering, hidden half in shadow and half in shifting torchlight, a part of him was grateful Lysander was able to have this moment for himself. Then the dread kicked in. He wore a tan-leather waistcoat over a plain gray shirt and black linen pants. Seraph must have found him the clothes. The collar gaped, the laces were loose, and he’d rolled the sleeves up past his elbows. Seeing Lysander in elven clothes shocked Eroan every time. Aroused him, too, in ways that weren’t entirely comfortable in public.

The others hadn’t seen him. And there were many, many elves at the fayre to see. Eroan scooped up two wooden goblets of wine, one for himself and one for Lysander, and skirted the revelry, hoping to reach Lysander before anyone else distracted him.

The dragon’s keen eyes scanned the crowd of mingling elves. From a distance, he appeared confident, but Eroan knew the look of that jaw and what it meant.

Of course, Lysander wouldn't have stayed away, and he shouldn't have to. He was right. The elves would never be ready to have a dragon among them. This had to happen, but it had to happen with Eroan beside him. He wasn't alone. Not anymore.

"Here." Eroan hid his breathlessness behind a smile and handed over the goblet.

Lysander blinked, took the cup, and immediately gulped down a few generous mouthfuls. "There are a lot of elves."

"There are," Eroan agreed. "Cheen is the biggest settlement outside of... in the valley." He'd been about to say Ashford, but old instincts to keep Ashford a secret, tripped him up before he could. He trusted Lysander absolutely, but there was enough happening without adding the existence of Ashford to the evening.

A fiddle player started up, quickly joined by a flute. Elves clapped, another began to drum along, and suddenly folk were dancing, singing, spinning, laughing. Ribbons rippled in their long, colored hair and at their ankles. Their painted faces bore all the colors of a rainbow.

Lysander's eyes widened. His soft lips parted, lifted by a fragile, genuine smile.

The impromptu ditty had a quick, toe-tapping beat, and Eroan found he wanted to take Lysander by the arm and lead him among those he called family, but by Alumn, he was afraid.

He hadn't anticipated this so soon. He'd planned to introduce Lysander slowly, acclimatize Cheen to the idea of having a dragon among them. In the middle of the May fayre was not slowly.

The song went on. The dancing reaching a pitch, and then, suddenly and too soon, it ended, the final chord strummed, the spell broken. Lysander blinked before briefly checking Eroan beside him. His little smile grew, becoming all the more real with every passing minute.

"You look good," Eroan casually added, hoping it sounded normal and gave away nothing of how seeing Lysander in elven clothes made Eroan want to see him out of them just as much.

Lysander's rigid stance softened. He slid an unashamed head to toe appraisal over Eroan. "You *always* look good."

A new song started up, just as fast as the first, and this time when the dancers twirled, Eroan looped his arm through Lysander's and pulled.

"I..." the dragon hesitated, no longer sure about his grand entrance.

Eroan leaned in, needing to get close to be heard over the sound of the music. His lips brushed Lysander's rough cheek, "It's all right. You have me."

Eroan led Lysander behind him, weaving through the packed crowd—not to dance. Not yet. He heard gasps in his wake, heard some mutter, heard a few scorn *dragon*, and Eroan didn't care. He had fought for Lysander's place here, and Lysander had played a part in keeping every single one of these souls safe. Lysander had earned the right to sit among them. With every step, Eroan's conviction grew. Alumn be damned, none had the right to deny Lysander his place among them.

A gap at a table ahead opened and Eroan slotted himself and Lysander down, startling the half-dozen occupants. Some immediately abandoned their seats, while the rest were more subtle about it, but they still found their excuses to slink off, leaving their table empty while all others overflowed.

Lysander's gaze darted.

"Don't mind them. It will take time. As you say, it has to begin somewhere. Had you stayed in my hut, they'd never know the real you." Eroan swallowed a few mouthfuls of wine, finding he needed it this night. Blades glinted beneath torchlight. Teeth flashed behind smiles. By Alumn, he had never realized how dangerous his people could appear.

"Do you think I'll get through this night alive?" Lysander asked.

There were loyal Order members among the crowd. Unbeknownst to Lysander, they acknowledged Eroan with subtle nods. Lysander did have allies—friends here.

Lysander had clearly seen the blades and the smiles. As a warrior, he knew how to read the enemy. But this night didn't have to be like that. Eroan would see to it that this night was different. "I think it's time you had a little fun."

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CHAPTER 3



Lysander

LYSANDER SUPPOSED he couldn't exactly blame them for their bitter hatred. He was the dragon prince, the one the elves had sent their Order assassins to fight to get to Elisandra. Lysander *had* killed many of their kin. Sons, daughters, mothers. He hadn't discriminated. Any elf that came over the tower walls was fair game to dragons. Nobody here was under any illusions that he was some kind of good dragon. Such a thing did not exist. But in the time he'd finished his goblet, and Eroan had gone off to find another, nobody had yet tried to stick their daggers in him, so there was that.

The music hadn't stopped and neither had its pace. He'd caught his feet tapping along, fingers too. There was no music-making like this among dragons. No dancing either. He'd never seen anything so hypnotic, and by the great gods, they were each so beautiful and full of life. Before Eroan, he hadn't even considered how elves lived. And seeing them now, it almost broke him open to think of how many he'd cut down.

An elf that wasn't Eroan stepped over the bench and sat beside Lysander, angled toward him. Lysander guarded his expression. This one, with his intense glares and sharp words, was proving to be a challenge. Nye. The male wore a smile now, very different to the snarl from the earlier encounter in the Order house.

“Here.” Nye slid a goblet across the table. Some of the contents sloshed over the sides. “Call it... a peace offering.” The elf’s words slurred some. Clearly, Nye had begun the celebration right after leaving the Order house.

Lysander took the cup. “Thank you.” Nye wasn’t armed. At least, nowhere Lysander could easily see, but if Nye was anything like Eroan, he didn’t need a dagger to kill.

Nye chinked his goblet against Lysander’s and lifted it. “To peace.”

There was a catch, wasn’t there? Lysander felt as though he was missing something, but as Nye was the first elf to reach out to him, he couldn’t very well turn him away. Eroan had chided him for his game at the Order house. Making up with this one might go some way for clearly getting it wrong earlier. “To peace.” He could play nice with elves, even this asshole.

Nye took a drink and Lysander mirrored the gesture, gulping deep. The wine was light and sweet, barely more intoxicating than water.

Although the music played and the elves still danced and drank their spring wine and got merry, Lysander was being watched. He could feel their unfriendly gazes, like insects crawling across his skin.

“Drink up,” Nye urged.

Lysander huffed. “If you think to drink me under the table, you’ve picked the wrong fight, elf.” And with that, he downed the entire contents of the goblet. He was dragon. No elven wine was going to go to his head anytime soon.

Nye lunged. His hard, warm hand snagged the back of Lysander’s neck and pulled, yanking him eye-to-eye. “You don’t belong here,” Nye hissed. “I’m going to see to it you don’t stay.”

Lysander held the elf’s glare, letting him have his threat. There was no use in fighting him here when Lysander was trying to show these elves how tame a dragon he could be. Besides, words had never hurt him. Not much could anymore.

Lysander peeled Nye’s fingers from the back of his neck. “I won’t tell Eroan of this, because if I did, you’d have to sleep with one eye open.” He kept hold of the elf’s hand, even as Nye tugged, and began to squeeze.

“You think I fear Eroan? Not so long ago, it was my bed he warmed.”

“Oh, you should have said!” Lysander deliberately laughed long and loud, hooking curious glances their way, making Nye’s face burn. “If it was a threesome you wanted, I’d happily oblige.”

The angry elf tore from Lysander's grip and stormed away, almost shoving a pregnant female over in his haste. The green-haired elf he'd shoved threw a colorful curse after him.

Lysander immediately recognized her from Seraph's lessons as Janna, Eroan's friend. He stood and offered his hand to help her sit. It seemed like the right thing to do. She looked at his hand and hesitated.

"It doesn't bite," Lysander said. "Most of the time." He snapped his fingers and thumb together a safe distance from her face.

Janna yelped. Her hands shot to her bump. "Oh!"

A few heads turned their way and the fiddle player missed his string, bringing an abrupt end to the music. Lysander winced, wondering if he'd just insulted a pregnant elf, but then she laughed, bright and free and *loud*. The music began again and slowly, attentions drifted away.

Janna took his hand and, still chuckling, settled on the bench beside him. "I see you're one to keep an eye on, Lysander."

"Are you going to threaten me too?" he asked. She was lovely, this one. Pale skin, bright eyes, long, tapered ears, and a radiating warmth that had Lysander instantly liking her.

"Is that what he did?" She thumbed over her shoulder toward where the crowd had swallowed Nye.

"He thinks he did."

"Ah. No, I'm not going to threaten you, though I may have thought about it a few times, until I saw you standing over there with Eroan earlier. I saw how he looked at you. But you already know that." Her smile was softer than those from the elves around him. Genuine. "Eroan's been looking for you for a long time."

"Me?"

"Someone special."

Lysander found he'd lost the ability to find the right words and wished Eroan was back already with more wine. A small puff of nervous laughter escaped him. "I'm not that special, you know."

"Well clearly, he sees it. I suppose it makes sense that you don't."

"It does?" None of what she was saying made much sense at all.

"Just..." She sighed, and Lysander heard something like longing in it that made him wonder if there had been more between her and Eroan than little-finger-hook friends. Her hand went to her bump again. "It will take

someone like you to keep him safe. He doesn't know when to stop. Will you look out for him, Lysander?"

He knew of what she spoke. Eroan kept poking death with a stick and one day, if he didn't quit, death was going to take that stick and beat him with it. "I'll try."

She looked him over, her gaze penetrating. "I think you will."

"Janna!" Seraph squealed from Lysander's right. "When's the little one due?"

"Oh, a few more weeks yet."

"A summer babe, for sure."

They laughed and chatted until Janna made her farewells. Seraph plonked herself in Janna's place, straddling the bench. "So, you dance, right?"

"Dance?" He arched an eyebrow.

"Oh no, no, no... you can't tell me dragons don't dance. I've seen you fight. You're an excellent dancer."

"I see where this is going—"

Her big eyes grew bigger and plucked on the strings of guilt he'd been carrying with him since this party started. "Please?"

Great gods, she wounded with that look. "Why?"

"I want to be the first-ever elf to dance with a dragon. I'll be the talk of Cheen for years. Besides, they all want to, they're just too scared."

He looked at the swirling, skipping crowd of dancers. There were plenty there that he and Seraph would likely get lost among their number. Or, the elves might all flee, and then he'd have to dance with the whole village watching and the elf wine wasn't nearly strong enough for that. "I don't think—"

"C'mon, before Eroan gets back. He's so growly. He'll say no. This is your chance for them all to see you're like us... mostly, a bit. There are humans dancing. See? This could be really good for everyone."

"You're not afraid of dancing with me and what others might think of you for it?"

She shrugged. "I don't care what they think. You're my friend. Let them think whatever they like just so long as they see you're who you are, and not some vicious monster."

He opened his mouth to tell her he was the vicious monster they all feared but Seraph caught his hand and tugged and now there was no

escaping her, not that he tried. A large part of him liked that he was being watched as Seraph pulled him into the fray. The elves were wary, suspicious, but also fascinated. He hadn't missed how many stared with open awe when they thought his attention elsewhere. He found he liked the attention. Whereas before, in the tower, he'd have preferred to forgo the gatherings among dragons in favor of training his flights, or taking to the wing, before that freedom had been stripped from him.

Seraph planted one little hand on his hip and grabbed his hand in her other, and then they were away, spinning and skipping in time with the others. Her enthusiasm infected his veins. He doubted Eroan could have gotten him to dance like this, and now he was twirling Seraph, his muscles loosening more with each beat of the drum. The music pulled him in and lured him on, making him forget he was the enemy here. Or perhaps it was Seraph who had the skill to make him forget. She laughed when he tripped over his feet, and then took a few moments to show him where to step. Other elves initially veered wildly away, but their fear faded, and it wasn't long before he and Seraph danced among them as though he *belonged*. He caught sight of Eroan off to the edge of the party, leaning against a hut and watching with a heat in his gaze and a smile on his lips that told a story. The same story Janna had seen.

Lysander grinned, elves clapped, and his heart soared where his wings could not.

Three days into this strange place and his fears had been realized. He never wanted to leave.



ELVES HAD STAMINA that dragons did not. It shouldn't have surprised Lysander to learn they could dance and dance, but like many things this night, it did. Seraph deposited him beside Eroan, then she was gone again, her arm looped with another. Breathless but buzzing, Lysander took the cup Eroan offered and drank it down. "Does she ever stop?" he gasped.

"Not until dawn." Eroan's gaze wandered where his hands wanted to and Lysander stilled, sensing an intensity to his elf that hadn't been there before. It was clear where this was headed, but Lysander, hot-blooded and

panting, would make him wait. There was pleasure to be had in delaying what they both wanted.

“Come with me,” Eroan’s tone ordered.

Lysander glanced behind him. The elves wouldn’t miss them, too deep in their revelry were they. He followed Eroan through the quiet parts of the village, keeping his steps elf-light, or trying to. Eroan had always been better at stealth. A path led away from the village, into the dark between wide oaks and towering pines. Lysander’s eyes could see well enough, but he suspected elves had better sight in true darkness, proven now by the way Eroan made moving through the brush appear effortless.

Lysander tripped over a root and reached for a tree trunk. “The wine,” he explained as Eroan looked back. He couldn’t very well admit Eroan was better. Or perhaps it was the wine. He did feel a little light-headed. Or maybe that was Eroan too. Everything of late had felt dreamlike. Too good to be real.

He blinked and Eroan had vanished, as easy as that. One moment he’d been ahead, his pale blond hair like a beacon in the dark. A blink, and then nothing. Lysander pulled up and listened. A soft breeze whispered through heavy branches all around, setting the leaves rustling. There was ample cover here should Eroan decide to stalk him.

“You think to hunt me, elf?” he said. The forest swallowed the words before the breeze could carry them to other ears. Sight had failed him here. He could barely see much farther than a few strides in either direction. But there was one sense he knew to be superior. He sniffed at the air and smelled wood and pine and earth. “Damn.”

“You’re too easy.” Eroan’s warm mouth brushed his ear, his chin grazed the back of Lysander’s jaw and then that warm, wet mouth trailed lower, placing neat, delicate kisses on Lysander’s neck. Shivers cascaded down Lysander’s back. He couldn’t stop them, the same as he couldn’t stop his suddenly galloping heart.

“Easy?” Lysander tilted his head, giving up his neck to Eroan’s scandalous mouth. And Eroan took it, pressing himself in close against Lysander’s back. His hand shifted over Lysander’s hip and roamed down his front, pushing against the belt, making the trouser waist dig in. There was nothing soft about Eroan, there never had been. But he couldn’t stand having the elf against his back. He needed to see him, all of him.

Lysander turned, still inside Eroan's embrace, and met the elf face-to-face. In shadow, he was no less beautiful. Gods, his lips alone had been designed to tempt all the good thoughts out of Lysander's head, leaving only the bad ones and how he wanted to savage those lips and the rest of Eroan. Eyes made of a blue so deep, they reminded Lysander of the horizon and how he'd once tried to chase it on the wing. He could never reach it, of course. Like how he couldn't really have this elf forever, but while they had these moments, he'd make them everything. He thrust his hands into Eroan's hair, making him gasp, and kissed him hard, like Eroan alone could sate the terrible hunger inside. Eroan pushed in, meeting Lysander's desperate passion with his own, so they clashed, but too soon, Eroan pulled away.

"I'm sorry for shutting you out," he breathed, kissing a trail down Lysander's jaw. "I never wanted that."

"I know..." *Gods, don't be sorry.* Lysander couldn't take it. His heart was a wrecked thing and it only beat for Eroan, for the elf who somehow made the world better just by being in it. Lysander wanted to feel him beneath his hands, to explore every inch with his hands and mouth and tongue and all of him.

There was a tree at his back, although he didn't recall moving against it. Eroan was all he could think, all he could taste. Lysander kissed his mouth, his neck, his shoulder, but the jacket was in the way of the rest and Lysander's fingers wouldn't work, the laces too knotted. He growled out a curse and felt Eroan shudder against him. These elf clothes were some kind of fresh hell, all laced and tied like a puzzle.

Eroan stepped back, crossed his arms, and pulled the jacket and shirt over his head. Lysander admired the ripple of abs in low light. Then Eroan was on him again, his rough hands sliding down Lysander's back.

Lysander clutched Eroan's naked back, spreading his hands wide, and mouthed down his collar bone, making Eroan lean out. Lysander held him firm and licked lower, nipping at a pale, erect nipple. Eroan hissed, and by diamonds, it was the best sound Lysander had ever heard. Lysander's straining cock throbbed, trapped as it was inside his trousers, against Eroan's grinding hip. He wanted to grab at Eroan and take him, own him, bite him, fuck him, and make him his, but he wouldn't. This was too good to rush, too delicious to ruin with a quick fuck against a tree. He wanted more in ways that hadn't mattered before.

“You’re trembling,” Eroan said.

Lysander clutched him closer. He considered lying, telling Eroan he was cold, but Eroan would see through it. He let his head drop back against the tree and looked up at the thousands and thousands of dark, waving leaves. “I like it here. I like you.” He more than liked it, but the other words, like love, seemed as though they might be too heavy for this moment and the last thing he wanted to do was ruin it.

Eroan purred and nudged Lysander’s jaw with his chin. Then those little elven teeth grazed at Lysander’s neck at the same time as Eroan’s hand found Lysander’s aching erection and palmed it through his trousers.

The trembling had Lysander gritting his teeth. Control. He had it. But the damned elf was going to make him come too soon if he didn’t do something to lessen the lust. That or he’d snap and be too rough. Ever since Dokul, the viciousness in him had found a louder voice inside his mind.

Eroan stilled, like he knew Lysander’s thoughts. He filled Lysander’s vision with blue eyes and pale lashes. “You want to fuck me, then what are you waiting for, dragon?”

Those words from Eroan’s lips, they made Lysander’s control unravel so fast he couldn’t have gotten it back if he’d tried. He clutched at the back of Eroan’s head and kissed him so hard he could drown in him. He fumbled with his own fly, desperate to free himself. And then Eroan’s hand was there, batting his away, and Eroan suddenly had him pinned against the tree, his hand a blessed torture on Lysander’s freed cock. Slow, then fast, then his thumb would sweep over, collecting the leaking wetness to moisten his grip, and all the while Eroan’s mouth worked at Lysander’s, owning him in both ways. Thoughts split between head and cock, Lysander wasn’t a man any longer, he was a creature of need, a beast that hungered and it was only Eroan that held him controlled.

Pleasure snapped and spilled, racing down his spine. He cried out only for Eroan to smother his mouth with his own and plunge his tongue in, taking even that noise from him. Lysander’s hips bucked, his seed spilling in a pulsing moment of mindless ecstasy. By nights, the elf wrecked him every time.

Eroan leaned back, his eyes glassy and hair all messed up from where Lysander had pulled at it. He liked this Eroan the best, the one no other saw. Lysander pulled him in close, chest-to-chest, and kissed him slow, savoring the male taste of him. It would never be enough, because Lysander loved

him, he loved him so much it hurt every time he thought on it. It hurt in that place inside where his magic stemmed from. Maybe it was his soul, he wasn't sure. But he knew if he lost Eroan, it would destroy him like nothing else in this world was capable of.

Lysander's hands steady now, he caressed Eroan's cock, listening to his breaths as he buried his face against Lysander's neck and clutched at his back, clinging on so there was nothing between them.

"Alumn, yes..." Eroan breathed. The words beat hot against Lysander's neck and Eroan moved in time with Lysander's strokes, thrusting into Lysander's hand. Lysander held him, feeling every tremor, every lustful shudder. Eroan's grip switched to Lysander's shoulder, fingers digging in. He looked up and locked his gaze with Lysander's, and in that moment, the elf's thrusts stuttered, his seed spilled, and he gasped out his pleasure. Lysander pulled him close, the both of them panting and flushed and spent. "I want to watch you come all night every night."

"Making promises, dragon?"

"Only to you."

Lysander smelled it first. Woodsmoke. But different. He breathed in, tasting the hint of smoke on the back of his tongue. Smoke and steam. Fresh wood burning. This was no ordinary campfire or torchlight. "Something is wrong."

A distant cry shattered the quiet. Eroan jerked free, immediately scooping up his jacket and throwing it on. He paused, searching the dark. "The tree... No." He bolted.

Lysander fumbled with his own clothes and stumbled forward. The ground tried to tilt out from under him, almost dumping him on his ass.

He reached for the tree and gripped its gnarly bark, seeking to balance his head. The screams continued. Wails of grief that skittered chills down his back. Dread hollowed out his insides. This was it, he knew. This was the moment it all went wrong, and by nights, why couldn't he see straight? He tried to move again and stumbled forward, making it all of three steps before grabbing for the nearest tree trunk. By diamonds, his head spun.

He pressed a hand to his eyes, trying to rub away the blur. It couldn't be the elven wine. It had been weaker than water. This was something else. This was *familiar*.

Mirann had used a drug on him time and time again. It began as a way to numb his thoughts, but later, it had been worse, much worse. This was

the same, and he knew what came next. But it couldn't be Mirann. There was no way she could have gotten to him. She wasn't here. Was she?

He looked up, searching the swirling darkness, and there, a figure even darker than the forest emerged from its cover. Dark clothes, dark hair. He could almost be imagined, this phantom who came for Lysander.

"I wasn't sure of the amount, or if you'd taste it in the wine..." Nye said.

Lysander made a grab for him, but his fingers sailed right through. A ghost then. Because this didn't feel real. The forest slid sideways, dropping Lysander to his knees in the dirt and decaying leaves.

Nye was everywhere suddenly. Lysander could taste smoke on him and hear the screams. "Don't... do this."

The dark figure blurred. "It's already done."

And Lysander fell into darkness with the screams of elves following him all the way down.

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CHAPTER 4



Eroan

“EROAN! Eroan, it’s the tree! The tree burns!”

Hands pulled at him, but he didn’t need to get any closer to see the impossible. Flames clawed at Cheen’s ribbon tree, devouring ancient branches and the memories of thousands dead. Red and orange licked at the night sky. Wood snapped and cracked. Embers twirled, stinging his face. It couldn’t be real.

“Buckets!” he called. “Set up a bucket line now! You, get to the pump, create a line. Go!” He barked at any and all, directing the panic into more useful action. The bucket line grew. Buckets sloshed. But the fire blazed too hot, leaping from branch to branch, tree to tree. He knew the tree was lost, but now it was Cheen he had to save.

Lysander wasn’t here. He hadn’t followed. And that concern niggled the back of Eroan’s thoughts, but Lysander could look after himself. If the village burned, there would be no sanctuary for any of them.

He took buckets and wet the trees ahead of the flames. Order elves climbed into the canopy and tossed water on leaves. By Alumn’s grace, the wind blew the flames away from Cheen, and the fire soon burned itself out on spring green leaves that refused to light.

It seemed to go on forever and yet end so suddenly, leaving elves stunned.

Alumn's tree. Once so full of life and color, now stood a stark, black skeleton in a burned landscape of trees. His people wept on their knees, collecting ash in their hands as though they could somehow pray the tree back to life.

How?

It was all he could think. How could this happen?

He wandered the ash-strewn path, collecting empty buckets, needing to do something, anything, because if he stopped, the rage inside might engulf him like the flames had engulfed Alumn's tree. Someone had done this. The tree was green, full of fresh foliage. It wouldn't have caught by a single flame alone. The celebration saw to it that nobody would witness whoever had done such a terrible thing. He couldn't imagine any elf setting the blaze. A human then? But why?

Why, why, why.

"Eroan, Anye wishes to speak with you."

He nodded mutely at the messenger and steered his path through the village toward Cheen's main hall. He had brought the humans here. He had trusted them, offered them food and elven hospitality and they'd repaid him with this travesty?

By the time he entered the hall, his fists and jaw ached, and his thoughts raced. Someone must pay for this.

Anye stood behind the long meeting table with the other council members either side of her. All stood. Eroan hadn't noticed the others here, or how the door had been sealed behind him, until now. He blinked ash from his eyes.

Silence.

He could taste the change in the air and tried to breathe around the sudden bite of fear nipping at the edges of his rage. The humans were here too. Chloe. Her eyes were full of the same rage burning in Eroan.

"Where is the dragon?"

He looked at Anye, wondering if he'd misheard. "What?"

"The dragon. Where is he, Eroan?"

The elder's gowns were soot-stained. She had ash smudges on her cheek and fire in her eyes too. But a coldness had wrapped around her, making her stand rigid.

"I... he's in my hut." A lie. He didn't know what else to say and immediately regretted it when Anye's gaze hardened. She knew it to be a

lie. They'd already looked for Lysander.

"You left the fayre together. Where did you go?"

Panic clutched at Eroan's heart. The enraged faces of those around him told him what his heart already feared. "He didn't do this."

"That's not what I asked."

"Don't..." Alumn, this was a trial. He searched the crowd. Seraph wasn't here. Neither was Trey. Only a few here knew him well. No Janna, no Nye. "This wasn't him."

"Where did you go?" Anye asked again.

"Into the woods. Together. He was with me the whole time." Panic raced through his voice and he didn't care.

"Why did you go into the woods?"

He tried to calm his breathing, to stop his fists from shaking, but there was no hiding his rage and fear. His people, they had already made their decision.

"Eroan. You will answer me," Anye commanded. "Why did you go into the woods?"

"To fuck," he spat, relishing the gasps. Disgust ticked across Anye's face. She looked away. "He was with me. I fucked him against a tree and he got me off right after." Others looked away. Some muttered prayers to Alumn. A horrible sense of loss gripped Eroan's heart and emotion knotted his throat. When he next spoke, his voice cracked. "So he couldn't have done this."

"What proof is there of this?"

"Proof?" He blinked at her. "Proof I fucked a dragon? You're truly asking me this?"

She winced. "Where is he then, Eroan? Why can he not be found anywhere in the village? Why is he not here, standing beside you, corroborating your story?"

He swallowed around a harsh dryness. "I don't know. I left him in the woods when I heard the screams." Where was Lysander? He should have been here. He would have been here. There was no doubt in Eroan's mind that Lysander would have come. He would have helped stop the blaze. So why hadn't he? Someone or something must have stopped him. He looked again about the hall. His friends weren't here. Perhaps Seraph knew more. She was always watching, always listening. Maybe Lysander was with her?

“Why would he do this?” he asked Anye, and then the crowd. “Why? He came here to make peace. You saw him among you. Why would he hurt us?”

“He’s dragon,” Anye replied, her voice coming down like the edge of an axe.

Regret and dread pulled the corners of his mouth down. “Don’t do this.”

“You force my hand.”

“Anye, please...” He stepped up to the table. “Please. You have my word. He didn’t do this.”

The elder’s expression burned with cold condemnation. “You stood where you stand now and you lied to us before, Eroan. Your word is worthless.”

He flinched, the words striking like a physical blow. “I’ll find him and he can tell you himself.”

“When he is found, he will be killed.”

“No.”

“Eroan, you leave me no choice. I did not want this. We opened our arms to your dragon prince. We sheltered him, out of respect for you. But it is clear, he has you bespelled, likely to seed chaos and dissent among us. We were wrong to trust a dragon. We were wrong to trust you. There must be recompense for this heinous act.”

Order elves approached Eroan from behind. He caught a glimpse of their blades, freed at their sides. Lifting his chin, he looked Anye in the eyes.

“Someone must pay,” she said, softer now.

“You’re making a terrible mistake.”

She shook her head. “Our mistake was believing in you.”

A nod from Anye, and the Order elves rushed in, clutching at Eroan’s arms. He didn’t fight, but stood his ground, his gaze never leaving hers. “Say it. Say the words.”

“Eroan Ilanea. You are to be taken to the village square and immediately executed. May Alumn’s light forgive you.”

It snapped. His control. His patience. His everything. For all he had done for his people and this was how they repay him. Fury was a fire flash burning beneath his skin, scorching to his very soul. “You’re fools! All of you! You see nothing, just your own prejudice. He came for love, not to destroy it. Someone else burned the tree. Someone else did this!” The

assassins yanked Eroan backward but by Alumn he wasn't done. He tore from one, only for the elf to snatch at him again. "Kill me. I don't care. But leave him be. Just let him go. He's suffered enough for the mistakes of others and I'll not have him suffer under elves too." They pulled, yanking Eroan off-balance. He twisted and bucked. More rushed in, their hands closing around him like iron shackles. Too many. He couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. And it seemed so wrong that this would be how he died. Killed by his own people. People he loved. People he'd protected.

The same people he'd saved over the years had gathered outside. Cold tears wet his face and he let them see. "He didn't do this!" He said it over and over. They had to know. Even if they were his last words, they had to know Lysander didn't hurt them.

A chopping block sat dead center in the village square. He saw it and his thoughts fell as silent as the crowd staring on. This wasn't how elves did things. This was wrong. So wrong. "Alumn... make it all be for something," he whispered.

Rough hands shoved him to his knees.

Those same hands held him in place.

Hands shoved against his back, forcing him forward. The timber block's splinters dug into his neck.

More tears squeezed from Eroan's eyes. He prayed in whispers, begged for Alumn to hear him. "Alumn, take his hand and lead him away from this place, from these people. Help him find freedom, for me. I have served you my entire life. Grant me this last wish. Save him because I cannot. "

"Do you have any last words?" Anye asked. She fronted the semicircle crowd. Her white robes dirtied with ash and her eyes haunted.

Eroan tilted his head. He saw Janna then, one hand over her mouth and the other on her bump. Tears streamed down her face. His heart broke. Seraph stood beside her, her eyes fierce and blazing an icy cold. She would go after vengeance. He blinked, for her only, begging her not to throw her life away.

"I am Eroan Ilanea," he raised his voice, even though it broke and quivered. "I was forged in the fires of Ifreann, quenched in Alumn's maelstrom, and crafted by fate to protect my people. I did not fail you."

He closed his eyes.

A blade whispered from its sheath.

The cold edge of that blade kissed the back of his neck where Lysander's touch had caressed less than an hour before. How had this happened?

He wished... he wished Lysander were here, just so he could tell him not to seek revenge. He should walk away from it all, from everything, but of course, he wouldn't. Eroan feared if Lysander learned of what had happened, Cheen would not survive the dragon prince's wrath and the war would go on until all elves had died. Perhaps that was what they all deserved.

"Drop the sword." Chloe's accented voice sailed through Eroan's thoughts. "Or your elder will not see the dawn."

He blinked tears from his eyes. From his low, twisted angle, he could make out Chloe standing beside Anye, a human pistol pointed at the elder's head. His heart stuttered.

"Lift Eroan off the block," Chloe ordered.

"You have no right!" Anye snapped.

"Perhaps not. But this is a mistake, and I cannot stand by while you execute a good man."

"He is elven, not human."

Chloe smiled, but it was a shallow, human smile. So very dragon-like. "Don't you see? What we are doesn't matter. It is *who* we are that defines us. And I have learned who you all are. Free Eroan now." Her thumb cocked the weapon, readying it to fire. If she killed Anye, the Order would kill her, and the rest of the humans here. Chloe's actions would mean war.

Everything Eroan had worked for fell like ash around him. Building bridges, making peace. He could see it in Anye's eyes: it was over.

"Release him," the elder said.

The blade vanished from his neck. Hands pulled him upright and released, leaving him standing alone, numbed and detached from his people. He'd been ready to die. So ready. And now. Where did he stand now? With his people or with Chloe's? Where did any of them stand? Steadying his breathing, he took in the faces of the elves around him. They did not trust him. They did not trust the humans.

Chloe released the gun's hammer, lowered it to her side and moved away from Anye, backing toward Rowan. "It is time we leave your sanctuary. *Merci*... thank you for your hospitality." Her human troops separated from the crowd and stepped into place behind her, behind Eroan.

The humans had chosen for him.

Seraph broke from the crowd and marched to his side. She planted herself at his right. “I stand beside Eroan.” She didn’t look at him, likely knowing if she had, he’d have told her to stay. “Who is with me?”

Janna glanced at the sandy-haired elf beside her, Ross. The male watched on, unaware of his partner’s indecision. Her pregnant bump caught Eroan’s eye. He gave his head a small shake, stopping her from making a mistake.

Assassins who had been absent at the trial stepped forward and made their way behind Eroan, bolstering the human ranks. They’d been kept away from the trial, he realized. Nye and Trey moved too, and Eroan’s wrecked heart stuttered some more. Nye dipped his head, acknowledging the sacrifice, giving himself to Eroan’s service.

This was too much. What was he supposed to do with them all? They had lives here. Family. A future. Eroan had nothing to give them.

“Then you are all exiled from Cheen,” Anye announced. Her voice remained steady but her hands trembled. “You are not permitted to return to this settlement. Ever.”

Eroan wet his lips. His breathing had slowed, his tears had dried, and a new resolute determination found its way to his heart. He bowed his head once to Anye, acknowledging her wishes, then turned to the people gathered behind him. Human and elf alike. Chloe’s smile warmed his wrecked heart. As wrong as this was, little else had felt so right.

“Gather your belongings. We move out at dawn.”

Eroan’s new pride filtered away, given a wide berth by those who remained in Cheen.

Chloe leaned in and softly said, “We have an emerald dragon to find, *qui?*”

“Yes,” the word came out too fast, pushed by emotion. He breathed slow, forcing himself to calm, feeling the future shift around him. “Yes, we do.”

CHAPTER 5



Lysander

THE AIR SMELLED like damp and stone and metal, nothing like the earthy, tree sap and mossy smell of Eroan's home. Lysander blinked at his surroundings, trying to fathom how he'd ended up waking in what looked and felt like a concrete box. He groaned around sore muscles and got his hands under him, shoving to his feet. The room was a big box. One of those strange boxes the humans had once been so fond of living in, though this one didn't appear to have any windows, just one gaping hole in a wall.

He brushed dirt off his clothes, breathing deeply as he smelled Eroan on himself, and climbed the sloped rubble bank out of the hole, seeking daylight. Warm sunlight beckoned him outside into a landscape he didn't recognize. Strange flat sections cleaved through skeletal vertical towers—nothing the size of the tower amethyst had called home—but similar in design. Iron rods poked from their tops and bent over, gnarled with weather and rust. There had to be a dozen he could see from his vantage point, all smothered in vegetation.

Shit. Moments ago he'd been with Eroan. He bent over, clutched at his thighs, and breathed. How long had he been out? Days? He didn't even know the lay of this land. Was he north, south, east, or west of the dragonlands? He couldn't smell the sea or the forest. Just stone and rust and

metal. Gods, so much metal. Wherever he was, it wasn't where he wanted to be.

He started forward. The damned elf who had brought him here didn't seem to be around now. Perhaps it had been an attempt to frighten him off. Once he'd reached higher ground, he could get a good look at the landscape. How far could a single elf take him? A day's hike, at the most. He'd figure out where he was and be back with Eroan at nightfall. And he and that elf would have words.

A shadow washed over Lysander, cutting out all light and chilling the air. The vast bulk of dragon banked in front of him, soaring between the towers before spreading its wings to catch the air to bring itself into land.

Lysander's lips twitched, a snarl trying to bubble free.

Mirann.

She landed well, considering how the weight of her distended belly must have thrown her balance off. A cow carcass hung limp and bloody in her jaws.

He wasn't running. Not from her. Besides, he had no idea which direction to run in. So he waited as she climbed across the rubble-strewn ground, flattening the vegetables underfoot. Still a few hundred yards away, she leaned in and dumped the cow close enough for Lysander to wrinkle his nose. Then, bizarrely, she used her nose to nudge the carcass closer.

Lysander arched an eyebrow. "If you think gifting me a fucking cow means something, you're more insane than I realized. Shift and tell me where I am or I'm walking out of here."

She slammed her front foot down to his right, sending up puffs of dirt and dust, ruffling his hair and rattling his clenched teeth, and brought her head in. Her hot, reeking breath flowed over him.

Lysander held her glare. As man, he barely stood higher than her snout. She wouldn't hurt him. This display meant she wanted him. Likely to help control that wretched brood of bronze and amethyst hybrids she was about to drop. He'd prefer to eat them than help her raise the monsters. Without a brood of her own to feed her during the nursing stages, she'd die. The kits would eat her carcass. It was her own fucking fault and all the bitch deserved.

She huffed and reared up. Power arched across Lysander's skin—her power—all its sparking, metallic snap, and with a blinding flash, she was human again, and huge.

“Shifting hurts,” she said, making her way forward, her pregnant belly so big it distorted her back. “Your bastard spawn want out.”

“If you didn’t want them, you shouldn’t have fucked me over—literally. Bitch.”

She stopped outside of grabbing range and rode her gaze over him. Sunlight gleamed off her hairless, naked, golden skin. She clearly didn’t bother with clothing out here, wherever this was.

“You smell like elf.” Her lip curled.

“Because I live with them now. What do you want? Why did you take me? I need to get back.”

“No, you really don’t.” She flicked her wrist and sauntered by him, descending into the concrete box home, her nest. “Your elf is dead,” her voice echoed inside, “and the village half-burned, so you will stay with me now, where you belong.”

He laughed and brushed aside the horrible twisting sensation her words tried to knot within him. “He’s not dead. I was just with him.”

“That was days ago.” She plodded down into the center of her nest and circled it, adjusting a few rocks here and there, making little difference to its layout. “There was a fire. Their precious tree burned to ash. In your absence, the elf got the blame. They executed him.”

He had his hands around her throat in the next breath and squeezed. If her belly hadn’t made killing her so damn awkward, he could have gotten a better grip. She tore free and slashed her nails, zipping open four deep cuts in his cheek.

Bitch. He’d kill her for this.

He pressed a hand to his face to stem the blood flow and stalked toward her. “I should have killed you before.”

“Come near me and I’ll shift again,” she slunk backward, “and then you’re never getting out of here. I’ll bury us inside. Our spawn will hatch and eat us whole.”

He stopped, the nest entrance at his back. If she shifted, she could do exactly as she said, but then he’d be forced to shift too, and he’d kill her. The lust for it boiled his blood. But killing her would not get him answers about who or what he was, about the Gold, about... Alumn, the Silver dragon he continued to see and hear in his dreams. “He’s not dead.”

She shrugged. “Believe that if you want.”

Lysander clutched the carved dragon pendant at his neck, freeing the scent of cut wood and pine. “He’s been rumored dead before. It doesn’t stick. The world could end and Eroan would still be alive.” Eroan wasn’t dead. He knew it for certain. Mirann used Eroan’s name because it was the only weapon she had.

Gold flashed in her eyes. “What a waste you are. So fixated on an elf, of all things. Elisandra really fucked you up, prince. In our brood, you would have been worshipped. You still can be.”

“I saw your kind of worship and want no part of it.” He leaned against a large stone lining the ridge of the nest, still keeping the entrance at his back.

She picked up a rock in both hands, walked three paces, and put it down again, then frowned at it and where she’d taken it from, puzzling over something. “My father was obsessed with you.”

“Was?”

“I haven’t seen him. It’s not... It’s not safe for me anywhere but here.”

“Why?”

She grunted. “Why do you think?”

As if in answer, her belly *moved*, the stretched golden skin pulsing. Lysander’s insides twisted, disgusted by his own creations.

“These make me slow. They make me weak. I’m forever hungry. When the tower fell, I fled in the confusion. Amethyst and bronze would have killed me. Dokul and the Gold control all dragons north of the channel now.” When she held Lysander’s glare anew, she made no attempt to hide the fear. “Father would likely rip these eggs right out of me and sit on them himself, if he could.”

“Carline.” He’d only seen the Gold briefly after she had shifted into her true form atop the tower. She’d seemed to help as Lysander had protected the fleeing elves, but she’d also fought against him. He didn’t know what to make of the Gold. Yet. Carline, the woman, had always been kind. He refused to believe her kindness all those years had been an act, as Akiem believed.

“They want me. They want these creatures.” She stroked her warping belly. “So I’m here and you’re here and we’re going to stay here until they’re hatched.”

She was insane. “No.”

Her chin jerked. “You don’t get a say. This is how it is.”

He stood and skidded down the nest-side into the basin. Mirann backed away, as she should. The shift tried to stretch his skin and roll out of him. He reined it back in. The mock-woman who stood before him had made sure he'd seed her fucking body by any means necessary. First, at the wretched coupling, and then again and again and again beneath amethyst tower, in the dark, his mind fucked-up on that drug of hers. Much of it he didn't recall, it was better that way, but that didn't change what she'd done to him. "You raped me, Mirann. Whatever foul things are growing in your belly are yours to deal with. I want no part of them. Hatch them here and I'll kill them. Every single one."

She smiled her dragon smile and patted her belly, her long nails flashing. "You won't."

He stepped closer, and this time she stood her ground. Her eyes widened, drinking all of him in as he crowded close. "Cage me again, and I'll tear your fucking heart out of your chest. I don't give a shit that you're pregnant. I don't care they're half mine—"

"You will."

He should kill her now. Kill her and crush those eggs and leave her carcass here for the flies.

"They're half bronze and half emerald," she went on. "And *that* you cannot deny."

"So what?"

"Emerald are powerful and the clutch are yours."

He'd heard it all before. Emerald were rare, emerald were different, emerald were feared. He laughed now. "Myths and the *clutch* are products of your abuse of me." He turned from her hideous figure.

Her warm hand snagged his arm.

"The metals and then the jeweled killed them all. All but you. Why would dragons kill their own?"

"Have you met a dragon?"

Her grip tightened. "Dokul knew. Elisandra knew. Akiem probably knows. I... might know."

"I'm done here." He yanked his arm free, almost toppling her over, and headed for the entrance. "Raise your own mythical emerald-bronze monsters but know that if they cross my path, I'll kill them."

"Has nobody made mention of your eyes, Lysander?"

He showed her a single finger and kept right on walking out of the nest.

“Of how beautiful your eyes are.” She followed, still prattling on, so desperate to lure him in.

“Fuck off, Mirann.” He walked into the sunlight and down onto the flat plain between the two nearest high structures. He couldn’t fly, but he could travel faster on four legs than two. He opened the center of himself, freeing the shift. Power rolled through him, breaking him apart, scattering everything that made him man, and remaking it into dragon. When he breathed, his lungs expanded and wings stretched, even the broken one flexed a little. It didn’t hurt anymore, just hindered. Gods, it felt good to be back in his true skin, to stretch his back and tail, to dig his claws in and shake his head. Sunlight warmed his scales. He gave them a rattle, dislodging dust and dirt, and freed a rolling growl.

“I wouldn’t have believed the old tales either.”

Mirann’s voice was smaller now, no louder than a bug in his ear. One he could crush. He turned his head and peered down at the small thing. A huff, and he tasted her in the air. She tasted like metal, but also like something that was his and should be kept, something precious. Giving his head another shake, ridding himself of the strange thoughts, he rounded on this small thing that was dragon inside. Kin, a part of him recognized. More than kin. She smelled like him. Mate.

“But I felt it.” This small female said. “When you beat me with the whip. I saw it... I saw it at the coupling. There is a power within you.”

Those were bad times. He bared his teeth and brought his head in low.

Mirann’s tiny human eyes widened. “I see it now,” she whispered. Her hands stroked over her belly, and as much as Lysander despised the creatures she had forced him to make, some instinct tugged on him to stay. Those eggs were his. She was his.

“You killed the queen.”

A growl rumbled up his throat, memories of the bitch-queen’s brittle laughter spilling forth.

“You could not have done any of those things if you weren’t *special*.” She lifted her hand.

He nudged the tiny warm hand with his nose and remembered a time when an elf had touched him there, spread his fingers and blinked up at him. He missed that elf. But something terrible had happened at his almost-nest where the elf lived. It had ended, as he knew it would, like all good things ended too soon.

He snuffled at the hand now and smelled himself all over the bronze and in her belly. In the nest behind her too. What other place did he have left? Everything was gone. Changed. But this place? Would it be so bad? He lifted his head and sniffed at the air. There wasn't a dragon for miles. This place was quiet. It was safe. And the female belonged to him.

Mirann shifted to dragon again, but she kept herself low, dragging her belly on the ground, her wings spread, open and exposed. She bared the long length of her neck and rubbed her chin beneath his, scale against scale.

Kill her.

He wanted to.

Fire warmed the pit low in his throat and growls simmered inside his chest. Mirann hunkered even lower, huffing out her fear. He opened his jaws, clamped his teeth around her neck, and dragged her backward and down-down-down into the nest, where she would stay. Where he would stay. For something that felt so wrong as man, felt so right as dragon.



HE DREAMED OF A SILVER BEAST, as tall as a tower, wings like the ocean, with eyes of darkness. Alumn, she was called, and he knew her in his soul. She had helped bring him back from death but that was just the beginning. She needed him, she said. Needed him to come for her—

Lysander opened his dragon eyes and blinked into the gloom. Mirann was coiled around him and he around her. A clutch of six eggs lay nestled beneath them. He would hunt soon. Provide. It was how things were now, and dreams of elves and silver dragons soon faded beneath ancient instincts to protect and provide. He was dragon.

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CHAPTER 6



Eroan

WITH THE COAST to the south and west and Ashford to the east, and without any clues as to Lysander's whereabouts, north was as good a direction as any to travel. But with every passing day, Eroan worried they were heading away from where they needed to be. Then the days became weeks, and their pace slowed, and now here they were, human and elf, making a temporary camp among the ruins of the old-world, stringing tents from trees and fire-roasting small game they'd caught during the day. Assassins patrolled while humans put their ingenious minds to bettering equipment and weapons.

It would be too easy to stop and put down roots.

Eroan leaned against a tree and watched those who had severed themselves from their old lives—for him. He didn't know what to make of it; didn't know how to thank them either. Chloe had saved him. These humans could have returned to their homeland, but none seemed inclined to, even with Ben and his ticking box telling them how their mysterious *radiation* levels peaked and troughed.

Humans were intriguing. Lysander would have been amused.

Eroan missed his dragon.

Seeing Lysander dance with Seraph at the May fayre, something primal had taken ahold. It had always been there between him and Lysander, but that dance before the tree burned was a memory Eroan clung to when his

limbs tired and his hungry belly ached. Lysander had laughed and smiled and moved like he didn't have a single care in the world. If Eroan hadn't already fallen for the dragon months ago, it would have been then.

And now Lysander was gone.

Vanished.

Not dead. Of that he was certain.

He took the firestarter from his pocket and rubbed his thumb along its edge.

"This is a good place to stop and consider the future." Chloe sat on a low wall beside him. Vines and roots had grown around the wall, like all vegetation had over these parts, reclaiming what had once belonged to humans. He wondered if she knew her ancestors had walked in the same places, never dreaming that dragons would one day take all they knew away from them. It seemed like fantasy, but the evidence was buried beneath their feet.

"It is a good place." The friction of his thumb warmed the firestarter.

Chloe waited a few moments, letting the quiet settle. Camp noises filtered about them. A chuckle here and there, someone hammering tent pegs into the ground, and as night fell, an owl hooted far away. She appeared at ease and a quick once-over scan revealed no weapons.

"We haven't seen a single sign of him," she said.

"Or any dragons."

Not one. No dragoncalls. No remains. It felt... strange not to be stalked from the skies, not to have to flee or keep to overhead cover. The skies were clear night and day. It was almost as if dragons didn't exist. Like they too had vanished alongside Lysander.

"An unexpected gift," she mused.

Or a sign that things were building. Eroan didn't trust the quiet. He'd lived his whole life killing dragons and this silence felt wrong. "We can't afford to relax our guard."

"Oh, I know."

He knew she did and smiled down at her. "A reminder to myself as well as to you and yours."

She wore her hair braided in the elven way, fixed close against her scalp, keeping the dark locks under control. She'd aged, Eroan realized. Humans wore age in their eyes and around their mouths. She'd gathered a few more lines. He couldn't remember when that had happened. Perhaps

after the battle at the bronze lines and before she brought her human pride to him.

“We are one, now,” she said, lifting an eyebrow. “Don’t you think? What is it you call a group of elves?”

“A pride.”

“*Oui*, we are a pride now.” She mused on that thought, her smile growing. “This land is very much like our own was. Ben has confirmed there is no risk of contamination here. There is ample food to be found foraging in the woods and fields. Water too, with the river nearby.”

She wanted to stay.

He couldn’t stop. But constantly moving on had left the humans haggard and weary. “I need to find him.”

She nodded slowly and lost her thoughts in watching humans and elves mingle around the campfire. “I hope I one day find a love as fierce as yours.”

There was no denying it. After all the raw things he had spoken at the trial and almost execution, every single soul here knew the depth of his feelings for Lysander, and yet none had frowned upon him for it. Even Nye seemed to have accepted it, though they had hardly spoken since leaving Cheen.

“He just vanished,” Eroan whispered. “I was with him and then... I ran, because of the fire. Before we left, I went back, to the place where he and I...” He hesitated, unsure, but he needn’t have worried. Chloe’s smile was a warm, accepting thing. “Where I last saw him, looking for any sign of what could have happened.”

He had told her the same over and over again since leaving Cheen and she listened every time, thinking it over.

“Someone took him,” she said, her tone leaving no room for doubt.

“I like to think the same, but nobody takes a dragon without their permission. Wherever he went, he did so willingly.” *Lysander left*, is what Eroan truly wanted to say. Perhaps Lysander had seen the burning tree and knew he’d be blamed, and so he ran. Eroan would have told him to do the same, had he been given the chance. Anye would have ordered him killed. The outcome would have been the same.

“You forget I was with you both in France,” Chloe said quietly. “He adores you, you know. He didn’t even try to hide it. Lysander’s emotions are all in his eyes, if you look close enough.” Chloe sighed and stood,

brushing dirt from her hands. "Someone took him. The more I think on it, the more I am certain of it. Seraph believes the same."

Seraph had tried to speak with Eroan. To his shame, he'd avoided her. He couldn't speak with her, not about this. She loved Lysander too, and it hurt to see the pain on her face, knowing the same hurt was mirrored on his own. She needed him to be strong. They all did. But when it came to Lysander's disappearance, he wasn't strong.

"Dragons then," he said, watching the fire. "But we've seen no sign of them."

She muttered something in her language that sounded short and sharp. "Listen to yourself. Defeated so soon? Not Eroan Ilanea. He would walk through dragonfire to save a soul. Just not his own." She looked up. "Why do you not fight for him this time when you have fought so hard before?"

It wasn't that he wasn't fighting, it was more that he could feel the frustration rotting him from the inside out. The injustice of it all was eating him up and he had no direction to chase, to target, to track. "I don't know who or what to fight." He narrowed his eyes on the firelight, watching the flames dance. "It's eating me up inside. The things that were said by my own people. They were... It keeps hurting and I can't make it stop. I don't know how to find him, Chloe. Not this time. I don't know what to do. You want to stop here, and I understand that, but I can't. I can't stop... and I can't go."

"Oh, Eroan..." She looped an arm around his shoulder and tugged him in close. He closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment of comfort in her arms.

"You've been so strong for so long, you do not know any other way," she whispered.

"I told him I'd never give up on him. This is what giving up feels like."

"You haven't. We haven't. We'll find him." Chloe freed him from her embrace but held him at arm's length, looking him in the eyes. All of her fierce warrior instincts glittered alongside the firelight in her eyes. "Will you let me pray with you, to your Alumn?"

Alumn? After everything that had happened, he doubted Alumn had listened to any of his prayers. "I wonder, too, if she is real."

"That is what faith is, believing in something without knowing for certain. I have faith that we will find Lysander again. You are tired, *mon*

amie. That is all. But you're not alone and you do not need to carry the burden alone. You understand?"

It was true. He wasn't alone. These people had followed him, for better or for worse. He owed them all more than this relentless trek to nowhere. "When did you get so wise?"

She laughed softly and released him. "Maybe some of your elven wisdom has rubbed off on me?"

He had never claimed to be wise but Chloe and her people often looked to him for answers. Her men and women were good. He admired them now, going about camp business. Strong and reliable, like elves, but with the kind of determination he aspired to.

"Tell me of your light, Alumn," Chloe asked. "Who is she?"

The campfire crackled and spat. Someone tossed another log on and sparks danced high into the dark.

"She is the light from which all things grow," Eroan replied.

"Humans too?"

"It depends who you ask, but I'm beginning to think so. Years ago, with Xena—an elder from my old home—I traveled to a place called Ashford, an elven center. There, I read some Alumn scripts, learning things not taught when I was an elfling. Elves were kind before—"

"Forgive me, but some of your kind has strayed from that path."

Indeed, they had. Kind was not the way of his people. Not anymore. "It would seem so. However, we were kind. We were protectors of all. Humans were the thinkers, the inventors, the imaginers. And dragons had a place too. To think such a thing among elves today would be blasphemy, but the older scripts did not discriminate. Dragons were warriors and war-makers. And it was said, all three, when brought together, created balance, ushering in peace, but that is not how it was."

"What happened?" she asked, speaking so softly he almost didn't hear her.

"They fought, and so Alumn cut the world into three. She watched over all, as the sun does, tending to her creations as they grew. We are taught young that Alumn is watchful, that she sometimes offers a guiding hand when needed, but also that she protects only elves. I wondered if that was my ancestors' wishful thinking. For all her watchfulness, I have prayed for Lysander's protection many times with no answer."

Chloe ran a hand over her braids. “How do you know she did not answer?”

“If she did, he would be here now.”

“Our faith is often tested. Perhaps Alumn tests you?”

The constant simmering rage that had been with him since Cheen tasted like metal at the back of his throat. “Then it’s time she stopped. “

“I’ll pray to Alumn for you, Eroan.”

“It is Lysander who needs your prayers, not I.”

A sadness dampened her smile. “He has featured in them since I could not stop what happened to him in France.”

She left Eroan’s side to tend to the camp. As the assassins returned from their shift on watch, Eroan took up his dragonblade and melted into the strange, barren landscape littered with crumbling walls, leaning towers, and wind-stripped trees. Few elves traveled north but word among the pride was that Trey knew these lands from his time as a messenger, and it was Trey he sought out now.

Sound carried far in this strange, open land. He heard the voices raised in anger before sighting two elves among the bramble covered rubble. Trey and Nye. It was likely none of Eroan’s business what they argued over but doing it so far from camp in a place where their voices carried was reckless.

Eroan whistled, high-pitched through his teeth, silencing them both. He scrambled down a rocky bank, landing on their sheltered plateau between high, old walls. Trey’s face was flushed, his clothes askew as Nye seethed, pacing back and forth by a far, crumbled wall. Clearly their words had been heated and passionate. “I heard your voices at a distance. Had there been dragons—”

“There are no dragons here,” Nye snapped.

Trey narrowed his eyes at Nye before briefly tipping his head at Eroan. “I’m sorry, sassa. It won’t happen again.”

Nye scrambled up the rubble and out of sight. Eroan dampened his own irritation down. Trey peered down, skirting Eroan’s gaze. “Is everything all right?”

“He... I guess you know how he gets?”

So this was personal, more personal than a passing disagreement between Order elves. “Nye can be passionate in his beliefs.” And he had a temper when pushed.

“Yes,” Trey sighed, his gaze seeking Nye’s path, clearly wanting to go after him. “Truth be told, I worry for him. Something has changed in him since... since we left. Will you speak with him? He respects you.”

Eroan should have already spoken with Nye. He owed him that. But Nye had clearly been avoiding him. “Of course. Return to camp. I’ll take this watch and speak with Nye on my return.”

“Thank you, Eroan.” Trey gripped Eroan’s shoulder, his hand firm. He lingered as though to say more, but instead, he squeezed Eroan’s shoulder and left, following Nye’s path out of the ruins.

Trey would be good for Nye. Alumn knew Nye needed the company.

Eroan lifted his gaze to the night sky and its twinkling stars. Did Lysander see the same stars? He almost prayed to Alumn that he did, but what good had his prayers ever done? And the worst of it was, he’d squandered the few days he’d gotten with Lysander, foolishly focused on his duties, assuming the dragon would be there waiting for him.

He should have listened to Lysander earlier. Or maybe he’d been a fool to think it could ever have worked in Cheen. A fool was all he was good for as of late.

Eroan picked up a rock and tossed it far down the valley between towering ruins. The rage bubbled inside, growing hotter. He’d given his entire life for elves. He’d lived and breathed love for his people. No more. Cheen could rot. Ashford could wither. He no longer cared.

“Damn you, Alumn!”

His voice carried far into the still night. He hoped, if Alumn was real, she heard him and she damn well listened. Because he was done with her too.



NYE AVOIDED Eroan’s attempts to track him down, always managing to busy himself or make himself scarce as though he knew Eroan sought him out, and so time ticked on, and the camp grew. Stone from nearby ruins was repurposed as walls for temporary dwellings. Definitely temporary. They couldn’t stay here, but the natural, sheltered basin was as good a place as any they had come across to stop and consider their next move.

“Nye,” Eroan caught sight of the assassin as he strapped a blade to his back, readying for patrol. “May I join you this morning?”

Nye responded with a jerk of his chin and left the camp, leaving Eroan to follow, or not. Their patrols had driven paths into the undergrowth around the camp. Some branched off to the river, and others to the meadow, where deer and pheasant roamed. Mist hung low, obscuring the path ahead, but keeping the sound of their passing muffled.

“I want to thank you,” Eroan said, trailing a few steps behind.

“For what?” Nye’s loose, dark hair skimmed his shoulders. He wore it down and unbound these days, preferring to tuck it behind his pointed ears than tie it back.

“For being here.”

“There is nothing to thank me for. Of course I would follow you. It’s all I’ve ever done—follow Eroan Ilanea, walk in his footsteps, finish second to his first, have his cast-offs.”

That last one slowed Eroan’s pace. Nye strode on ahead, his boots thumping in the grass. Cast-offs? Did he mean Trey? “There was nothing between Trey and I. It was one night, a long time ago. Trey was passing through Cheen. We...” Eroan fumbled the words, still following the snaking path behind Nye’s dark figure. “Granted, he was my first, and for my part I was grateful.” He winced. Was grateful the right word? He didn’t want to insult the memory of his time with Trey by shrugging it off as a dalliance, but Nye’s marching pace wasn’t giving him anything to work with. Was Nye angry because Eroan had spent the night with Trey and let him go, or because he hadn’t spent *more* time with him? The truth was always the best approach. “It was a tryst, meaning little to either of us.”

Nye laughed, but the sound was harsh and dark. “It’s like you don’t even know you.”

What did that mean? “Nye, wait.” Eroan jogged to close the distance, passing over mossy mounds and pushing through brush. “Wait, will you? This is foolish. What would Curan think of us arguing over something so small?”

“We’ll never know. Your dragon killed him.”

“No, his own mistakes did that.”

Nye whirled, a scathing glare halting Eroan. Mist dampened his face, making his dark lashes glisten. “I followed you because...” He hesitated, clenching his fists at his sides. “Because despite everything you’ve done,

everything you've put us all through, I still love you. I hate you, but I love you, too. Just like everyone you've used and thrown away. Janna... Trey still looks at you like—"

"Janna? What?" Eroan's anger churned. This was unnecessary and ridiculous. Nye was grown and capable, he shouldn't be behaving like a lovestruck elfling, at a time like this. "Nye, listen to me. I need you to be the leader you're capable of being." He reached for Nye's shoulder, but Nye grabbed his wrist and yanked, pulling Eroan off-balance, trapping him in close.

"You're so self-centered you don't even see the wreckage spread around you. You even think Janna's child is Ross's? The whole of Cheen knows it's yours. Everyone but *you* knows." He jabbed a finger in Eroan's chest. "You fucked her and left, going off to die for the cause you never intended to return from, and she loves you too much to tell you." Nye's top lip pulled tight over sharp teeth. "Seraph loves you and you push her away. She came to me because she thinks you're angry with her, that you blame her. They all fucking love Eroan Ilanea but none of them *see* you like I do. They think you do everything for them, but I know the truth. The bronze wall, the estuary. Every battle you fight, it's not for them. It's for you, because you can't fucking handle that you should have died in the tower..." The fog swallowed his words but Eroan heard them over and over, felt them yank the air from his lungs. "You should have fucking died, Eroan. You didn't, and it screwed you up so bad, you're still looking for death, even now. You're not a fucking hero. You're a coward. You're selfish. You're arrogant. You think only of yourself. You're a danger to those around you. Curan saw it and so do I!"

The rage solidified, turning cold and hard. Eroan switched his grip and clamped a hold of Nye's hand, twisting it until Nye tried to flinch free. "You think I don't know these things?" Eroan forced the words through bared teeth. "I carry it all with me. Xena's death. The death of the hundreds I left behind to go to France. Janna and her child, of course I know the babe is mine. It kills me inside every time I look at her. Yes, I'm a coward. I know it. And you...? I hurt you, Nye. And you're right. I used you. I needed someone—anyone—and you were easy. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for a lot of things. You think these things don't hurt me? They do. Every time I breathe, I hurt. It was all necessary. All of it. I sacrificed everything and still my people—the people I love—turned on me."

“By Alumn, you truly believe that.” Nye yanked his arm free, shook it out at his side, and pointed at Eroan’s face. “They turned on you because they finally saw the real Eroan Ilanea and all it took was a tree burning to do it.”

Eroan’s thoughts tripped. “A tree? ...What?”

The mist shifted from around them, pulling back like a blanket from a bed, revealing the blaze of two green eyes, each the size of the sun. As the mist peeled away some more, teeth like the one Eroan carried on his back glistened in the fog. So close, Eroan could have reached out and touched them. A dragon, as green as grass, hidden in the mist mere strides from them, and now it *moved*, so large it took the mist with it, making it swirl and dance around its rising head.

“Is that...?” Nye whispered.

“No.”

Emerald, yes. But not Lysander. The beast had two viciously curved horns instead of a crown. There were other differences too, subtleties Eroan only knew because he’d been just as close to Lysander’s dragon form. The head was broader, squarer, the snout shorter, but its shimmering green scales and sparkling eyes clearly declared it emerald.

Nye tensed to run. Eroan caught his arm. “Don’t. Move.”

The emerald could have attacked. One bite and they’d have been dead without knowing what hit them. It hadn’t. And instinct told Eroan it wouldn’t. The look in its eyes wasn’t a killing lust, more of a curious one.

The beast shook its head and huffed, then turned its head, focusing one eye. The pupil widened, soaking up the green, turning the eye almost completely black.

Nye tugged. Eroan held firm. Now was not the time to run. If they ran, it *would* chase.

The scales low in its neck glowed—the firepit. It was stoking its reserves just in case it needed to loose any flame. Eroan could take the blade from his back and pierce those scales in seconds, but the dragon would not react well even if it did later crawl off to die from the wound. Better to wait. To see what it was thinking.

Vast wings spread, whipping up the mist. It gave them a bellows flap, blasting them with sudden gale.

Nye bolted.

The dragon's head swung around. Its eyes narrowed to slits, its lips raised.

"Dragon!" Eroan stepped forward and waved his arms above his head. "Dragon! Here! See me!" The beast slid its attention downward.

Eroan swallowed, lowered his arms, and stood his ground. The head moved in, becoming everything he could see, just like Lysander had once done. Eroan breathed too fast; his heart pounded too hard. But if he ran, it would be over in a bite.

The dragon slowly blinked. It snuffled closer, breathing in short bursts through its nose, scenting elf. A growl bubbled from low in its throat, and then, remarkably, it pulled back and swung its massive bulk away. The bank of mist swallowed it whole, leaving no evidence of it having ever been here, just Eroan's thudding heart.



EROAN RETURNED to camp to find his people hastily packing their items. Nerves frayed, he snapped, "We're not leaving. Return to your tasks."

"You're alive..." The words rushed out of Nye so fast he couldn't hide his surprise.

"Were you hoping for a different outcome?" Eroan passed him by, resisting the urge to get drawn back into their fight. It wasn't over but the appearance of the dragon overshadowed all that. For now.

Ben emerged from a hut, his backpack in hand. "Nye said—"

"It didn't attack." Eroan slid the blade off his back and set it beside the campfire's glowing embers. He rolled his shoulders and breathed out, settling his nerves, trying to keep his head clear. "Ben, you're a scientist. What do you make of it?"

Ben had been Chloe's right-hand man. Broad-shouldered, with kind eyes and warm, dark skin, Eroan had immediately taken a liking to him. So had Anye, but Ben had chosen to be here, and Eroan took the opportunity to speak with the dracologist while he could. "It didn't attack," Eroan said again, speaking softly, though he knew most of the camp listened.

"What happened?" the American asked.

Folks returned to their places, cooking, building, tending to chores, but kept their eyes on the sky.

“In the mist, Nye and I walked right on top of it. It could easily have killed us but chose not to. Have you witnessed anything like it?”

“How did it react exactly?” He pulled a book and pencil from his back pocket and flipped it open.

Taking up a seat by the fire, Eroan told him everything, including how Nye had fled but the dragon hadn’t given chase.

“It was emerald?” Ben asked, needing confirmation.

“As emerald as I’ve ever seen.”

“And you’d know,” the man chuckled.

“Yes, I would.” Eroan let his lips lift. “It wasn’t aggressive. If anything, it was intrigued.”

“A dragon that doesn’t give chase sure is a rare thing.” He tapped his pencil against his chin. “Trey told me there used to be an elven settlement north of here. Cheen sent him up here last summer. He found ruins where they’d been. It could be the dragons in this area don’t see elves. Maybe it didn’t know what to do with you?”

“Could be...” Eroan tried to recall what he knew of northern dragons but could only remember brief snippets of things Lysander had said. “Lysander and his flights often fought what he called wild dragons to the north. The impression I got was that they were worse than amethyst, more aggressive, not less.”

“Less aggressive doesn’t fit with what we know.” Ben scribbled on his paper. “I’d like to have seen the encounter.”

“It was... different.” *Promising.*

A dragon who didn’t want to fight. Another like Lysander.

And it was emerald.

A coincidence, or something more? Emerald were rare. *Different.* Lysander had said as much, and Eroan had never seen another. If he could find it again, would it take human form and speak with him? Just the thought alone quickened Eroan’s heart. What if all dragons weren’t inherently vicious? To date, they’d seen no evidence of it, but that dragon had behaved differently like Lysander behaved differently.

“You have that look that says you’re thinking up trouble.”

Eroan surprised himself by laughing. “You’ve been talking with Seraph.”

“Honestly, she does most of the talking. Little firecracker, that one.”

He didn't doubt that. Looking about him, Eroan considered the temporary tents and stone huts. The people—his people—were doing the best with what they had, but they could do more if they knew they were staying. They could all do more if they settled a while, and maybe the emerald dragon would appear again. It could be an opportunity to learn more about the northern dragons, to learn why this place wasn't riddled with the beasts. And he might learn more about emeralds.

He stood and drew in a breath to speak. "All right, everyone." His pride put down tools and faced him. "Double the patrols. Keep your eyes on the ground and the skies. If you see an emerald, do not attack unless you have no choice. Retreat and report it to me. For now, let's make a more permanent camp here." A cheer went up, and he smiled for them, knowing they'd want to see it, but inside, his heart ached for the loss of its other half.

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CHAPTER 7



Lysander

HE SMELLED IT FIRST. A familiar lemony bite that tingled his tongue and made him think of the dark and the cold. Extracting himself from Mirann's coils, he watched her settle back down, covering her clutch of eggs with one spread wing and tail, keeping them warm and safe. She didn't open her eyes, barely woke at all. That was how it had been for weeks now. Soon, the eggs would hatch. He sometimes heard them purring within their shells. Days now. This time was critical. And now he smelled dragon.

He emerged from the nest, nose in the air and jaw parted, tasting the scent.

The sun sat low on the horizon, drawing the abandoned towers' shadows across the ground. Dusk.

The skies were empty. The intruder was not on the wing.

A growl tried to force its way up his throat. He swallowed it and waited. The scent grew stronger, shifting to him on the warm, summer breeze. He stayed low, stayed still, expanding his senses. He smelled rock and grass and metal. He saw birds roosting in the empty towers; heard them too. Their squawking grew until, alarmed, they took flight. Their incessant noise hid any other he might have heard.

The intruder approached from the foot of the nearest tower, having stalked close enough to leave little time for Lysander to prepare. Pink light

from the sunset made the dragon's scales seem green, but that couldn't be.

Lysander lifted his head. Stunned. It wasn't the light making the dragon seem green. The dragon was emerald.

The intruder growled and prowled closer still, his glare fixed on Lysander, wings spreading, making himself bigger, making himself the threat here.

Protect.

Lysander hunkered down, blocking the intruder's path to the nest. He lashed his tail and bared his teeth. He would fight this male even though they shared the same-colored scales.

He let the growl bubble free as a warning.

The intruder came closer still, wings out and head up, horns and teeth gleaming. Bigger, older, heavier, and with two working wings, Lysander was disadvantaged in every way.

This didn't need to happen.

But it would.

The intruder was almost on him now, trying to posture his way past Lysander. That might have worked if it was just a kill Lysander protected. But the nest was his. The eggs and his mate, his. This dragon, whomever he was, could not have them.

Teeth snapped. Lysander reared, built the fire and set it free, but the intruder was fast. He recoiled and reacted, lunging for Lysander's neck. Lysander twisted, strafing the beast with flame. The intruder grunted and turned. His spiked tail slammed into Lysander's lower neck. Flame spluttered off. Lysander hacked, choking, still breathing, but winded. And then the intruder was over him, making a strike for his good wing. Lysander snapped his jaws at the intruder's foreleg and clamped on, pulling. The beast screamed and swung its spiked head, clipping Lysander's crown. Something snapped. Pain throbbed down the back of his neck. He didn't care. Charging forward, the intruder rolled, trapping his own wings beneath him, showing the whites of his eyes. Lysander raked his claws at the beast's belly and clamped his jaws around its snout as he'd done dozens of times with vicious bronze. Only this time the intruder had anticipated it. Flame poured down Lysander's throat. He reeled, lungs scorched and vision a blur.

The intruder lunged into the nest.

Mirann's screams triggered a mindless rage.

He'd never heard a sound like it, like claws on ice.

Lysander plowed in and launched himself onto the lower back of the beast, sinking his teeth in. He dragged him out, churning up dust and dirt as wings flapped and claws gouged great troughs in the earth. Mirann came with the intruder, his teeth snagged on her snout. She blocked the nest entrance, spreading her wings, lodging herself in place, but the intruder pulled.

Lost to a feverish rage, Lysander bit at his neck, clawed at his back, tearing off scales. Nothing worked. Blood slicked the beast's back. Great gouges opened in his flesh. But he still had Mirann trapped between his jaws.

The crown.

Roaring his rage, Lysander twisted his head and lunged for the soft spot behind the emerald's crown. The dragon jerked his head back, bringing his two horns down, shielding the weakness. A horn jabbed up, into the roof of Lysander's mouth. He roared back, shaking out the pain and swallowing blood. When he turned back, the emerald had torn Mirann's limp body from the nest entrance and dived inside.

Lysander stilled. Blood poured between his teeth, down his chin. Wounds throbbed, hot and heavy, but it all numbed as he heard each egg shatter. The emerald re-emerged with an undeveloped kit in its jaws. Half bronze, half emerald. The kit's scales shone a strange metallic green. The big emerald beast looked at Lysander, making sure he witnessed. His green eyes weren't rage-filled, they weren't hungry. This wasn't mindless. He knew what he was doing.

The emerald tossed the tiny, almost formed dragon in the air and snapped his jaws shut around it, crushing the fragile carcass in one bite.

Lysander had fought.

There was nothing more he could have done, nothing he could do now. For every attack, the dragon had seen him off, and the emerald wasn't done. He planted a foot on Mirann's motionless body, clamped his jaws around her skull and squeezed, and Lysander let it happen. Teeth pierced behind her crown. Bone cracked. Her body twitched. And then it was done. The bitch who had delayed his death at the hands of the bronze, and then made him wish for it, was gone. And it hadn't been Lysander who had killed her.

The emerald threw his head up and roared his victory. The sound barreled through the empty land, claiming it as his. He fixed his glare on Lysander's and waited for retaliation. None came. Lysander had fought

hundreds of battles. This one he'd lost. If he pushed, this dragon would tear his throat out.

The emerald threw his wings wide, beat at the air, and took to the sky. As the day let go of the last of its light and darkness fell, the last sign of the intruder vanished.

Lysander limped to Mirann's side and nudged her, waiting for some sign she still lived. He nudged again, shoving her over. Half-lidded eyes stared at nothing. He'd hated her with every fiber of his being, but she'd been his. The clutch had been his too. And now it was all gone and he didn't understand why.

Curling into himself beside Mirann, he licked dirt and grit from his wounds.

He *did* know why.

The roar had been clear.

This land belonged to another. An emerald who had easily outfought and outmatched Lysander.

He lifted his head and looked in the direction the dragon had flown. *North*. Another emerald. An emerald with answers. An emerald who could have killed him, who *should* have killed him, but hadn't. North where the vicious wild dragons roamed.

He tucked his nose under his nail and waited for the wounds to stop bleeding.



MANY PAIRS of eyes watched him pass. They didn't behave like any dragons he knew. These blended with the scenery. He caught a glimpse of scales among the undergrowth or almost hidden behind mounds of fallen rocks. They hadn't attacked, and so he continued plodding north. The sun baked his scales, and when he stopped to drink, they were there, watching. He hadn't eaten. Where the emerald had done him over, he ached and limped and couldn't have caught a dead deer. The watching dragons knew that too. They'd left a dead horse in his path. Lysander had sniffed at it, expecting a trap, but they'd let him eat, unmolested. Watching.

He didn't like it.

They were planning something, plotting a way to stop him, but that didn't ring true either. They had the numbers; they could descend on him at any time, but none had.

He slept, curled tightly at night, and they left him alone then, returning to wherever they came from. But as dawn broke, they returned and watched him some more.

By the fifth day, he'd had enough. He shifted, forcing all of the aches and loss into the body of a man, briefly staggering under the weight of it all. But when he lifted his head and straightened his back, he could see them. Jeweled. All colors. Black, like Akiem. White, diamonds. Topaz, blue.

These northern dragons were not how he remembered. As the queen's guard, he'd only ever tried to kill them, but with good reason. When they had descended on the amethyst dragonlands, they'd been vicious and half-crazed. These dragons were not like those. At least, not right now. They'd turn on him easily enough, especially if they learned who he was.

"Where's your emerald?" he called.

A dozen pairs of eyes blinked back at him. Some appeared to have grown bored. They gnawed on their scales, cleaning themselves.

He opened his arms and turned in a circle. Showing them who he was, but also getting a good look at them. They were everywhere. Perched on mounds of rocks, sprawled in old, man-made gullies between banks of stone once known as streets. "Am I really that entertaining that you must follow me every day?" he asked, lifting his voice so they all heard.

Wings ruffled.

"It's not every day they see another emerald."

Lysander had missed the man on his first sweep of the scene, but now that the emerald had spoken and drawn his eye, Lysander wondered if the dragon had somehow magically appeared on that rock, because this figure was not one to blend in. The man sat on a boulder, knees drawn up, arms casually resting over them. Sleeves rolled up to his elbows revealed strangely marked skin, like that of some of Cheen's elves. But this man was dragon. Layered, dark red hair fell about his face, half of it loose, half of it messily braided. He wasn't as old as Lysander had assumed from his dragon form, perhaps a few years older than Lysander. A shadow of whiskers darkened his chin while a dash of freckles lightened his nose and cheeks, and the smile on his lips spoke of how he knew exactly who Lysander was.

But his eyes. Is that how Lysander's eyes appeared to others? Full and deep and rich, as though he held all the answers in the depth of those eyes.

"You son of a breeding bitch, you killed my mate." Lysander started toward him.

The bastard jumped down off the boulder and lifted both hands. "Easy now. I did us both a favor and saved yah from your own instincts." His accent was different, harsher in many ways, cutting from one word to the next with a confidence mirroring the same confidence in his swagger.

"Fuck you and your favors."

"Aye, there's the amethyst in you. But look me in the eyes and tell me you're not relieved."

"I hated the bitch, but she was mine." Lysander swung for him. The dragon ducked and laughed. Laughed! Rage lit Lysander up. He righted himself to swing again when an arm hooked around his neck and heaved him back against a hard chest. Lysander grabbed at the man's forearm, trying to loosen it, but the male tightened, choking off his air. The watching dragons swirled in his vision, none of them apparently concerned for their leader.

"I dunnae wanna fight you, prince," he said, low enough that only Lysander heard. "But I will. And you'll lose. Do the right thing 'ere as yah did at the nest. Yield to me."

Lysander's heart pounded in his head. Black flooded his vision. If he passed out, there was no knowing what this flight would do to him. He'd come here for answers, hadn't he?

Lysander let go and fell limp. The brute shoved, dropping Lysander to a knee. Breathing took too much effort, but Lysander slowly regained control of it and his clearing vision. The dragons were still there, watching, dozing. A couple squabbled, but even that scuffle was all show with no teeth behind it. If this had been amethyst, half of them would have been trying to murder the other half. Bronze would have been the same, only instead of murder, they'd be trying to fuck each other. Was any of this real?

Lysander rubbed at his neck and looked up. "Who the fuck are you?"

The emerald offered his hand. "Name's Rhadgar, an' you're welcome 'ere among us, if you wanna to stay."

Lysander took the hand, gripping it firmly, accepting the pull to his feet. "And if I don't?"

Rhadgar's grip lingered a moment longer than necessary before he let it slip free. "Then yah free to go."

"How un-dragon of you." Lysander didn't trust any of this for a second. The smiles, the pleasantries. It all held the same shallowness as the elves had, and that had turned out badly.

Rhadgar chuckled. "Aye, you'll find we do things different in ta' north. A fact your queen kept from you."

"Elisandra keeping secrets? Whatever next."

The strange emerald laughed at that too. He patted Lysander on the back and steered him toward where the dragons parted, opening a path. "You wan' answers. See it in your eyes. You'll 'ave 'em."

But at what cost? Lysander guarded his expression and his heart. He'd been tricked before. He knew dragons. For all the smiles, there would be another side. There always was. He'd take the man's so-called answers and then he'd leave to return south, to Eroan, before Rhadgar's true reasons for offering sanctuary could materialize.

In the next step, Rhadgar jogged ahead, pulling his magic into him. He shifted once there was room among the dragons and debris, and with a jerk of his horned head, he urged Lysander to do the same.

Lysander pulled his dragon form back around him, wrapping himself in scale and flame, breathing deeply as the wounds came back to haunt him. He was stronger as man, but clearly this strange flight wasn't interested in spending any time on two legs.

He'd barely caught his balance from the shift when a dragon plowed in, but instead of attacking, it rubbed against his side and *purred*. Lysander's instincts had him wanting to clamp his wings closed and defend. Another veered in and nipped playfully at his feet. Lysander growled before recognizing the invite to play. It had been a long time since any dragon had asked him to play.

Rhadgar made a chuffing sound and the nippy diamond ducked its head, scolded. The beast peeled off and took to the air. Others followed, filling the sky with shining jeweled colors. The sound of so many of them riding the wind seemed as though it surely filled the world.

Lysander's breath caught. He'd never thought of his kind as beautiful before. But caught in sunlight on the wing, their scales dazzled.

The sense of a heavy stare skittered down his back. Rhadgar was watching him, not the skies. Lysander shook his head and walked on,

pretending all of this was normal, hoping Rhadgar didn't hear how his battered heart thudded. Dragons didn't behave this way. They didn't gather peacefully and *play*. The emerald had a hold over them. Lysander had seen this Rhadgar tear his nest apart. The emerald was vicious. Perhaps all these dragons were terrified.

As Lysander passed by Rhadgar, the emerald prodded his broken wing with his nose. Lysander rounded on him and growled. The emerald glared back, blinked, then drew his lips from his teeth in a wide smile.

Unamused, Lysander snarled and walked on, following the grounded dragons ahead. He would play their game. But he wasn't letting his guard down, not for Rhadgar's charm or the wonder of seeing dragons in-flight who weren't obsessed with trying to kill one another to get ahead. He knew monsters, and these were the worst kind. The kind that hid in plain sight.



“WHO BROKE YOUR WING, EH?”

Lysander swallowed what would have been his first reply and reminded himself he was playing their game, which meant pretending everything he saw was normal. “Elisandra.”

Lysander was witnessing some kind of gathering out in the open. There were no walls to protect them from attack, just dragons, some as men and women, sprawled about a field, campfires scattered among them. They kept their voices low. Lysander had no hope of hearing them over the sounds of the fires, but he'd mingle among them and discover Rhadgar's true character.

Rhadgar straightened at the table he'd earlier invited Lysander to eat with him at. The wood making up the table had been sliced from a fallen tree, likely by dragon claws considering its rough, wave-like surface. Just the two of them sat around it. None of the gathered dragons paid them any mind. “The queen done ordered me killed,” Rhadgar said. “Was before her clutch, before you an' Akiem and... what was her name?” He clicked his fingers. “I was a youngun then, a wee kit.”

“Amalia.”

“Aye, her. Never met her. But others did o'er the years, those who found their ways north. They said she had a softer heart, that one.”

“Before Elisandra ripped it out.”

Rhadgar’s eyes reflected some of Lysander’s old anger. “Your mother was a rot at the center of that tower.”

“Oh, I know.” Lysander consoled himself with a drink from the cup some dainty male dragon had handed him earlier in the evening. Of course, it was water. He’d have preferred wine. Even elven wine would have done. The fucking niceness of this place made his skin crawl.

“I daren’t imagine what you suffered beneath her,” Rhadgar said.

“No.” Lysander met the male’s gaze. “You can’t.” His back itched. They were being watched again. Turning on the chair, he caught several looking over. All looked away the moment his gaze snagged theirs.

“They’re curious,” Rhadgar explained.

“So am I,” Lysander muttered. The nearby fire crackled and spat. The air was warm, the night quiet. Everything seemed... perfect. But there was no such thing. “What do you want from me?”

Rhadgar gestured, opening his fingers. “Nowt.”

The accent made his words strange, but Lysander heard the meaning. It was a lie. Everyone wanted something from Lysander. Everyone but Eroan.

Rhadgar hadn’t touched his plate of food, but neither had Lysander. Rhadgar had noticed, but not commented. Having recently been poisoned by a backstabbing elf, Lysander was in no hurry to experience the same again. Still, Rhadgar had spent most of the evening so far eyeing Lysander as curiously as the rest of his flight. The male wanted *something*. Lysander just had to figure it out first.

“Nothing?” Lysander pushed.

Rhadgar stood and came around the edge of the table, stopping to lean against it so he could look down on Lysander. A position of power. “You’s suspicious. I get why. But no ’arm’ll come to ye’ here.”

He said all the right things, this one. “You lie smoothly.”

Rhadgar’s mouth ticked into a smile. “Dunnae need to lie.”

“Sure you don’t.” This male had a bigger ego than Akiem.

Rhadgar’s gaze turned heavy and half-lidded. He wet his lips and turned his gaze on his crowd of dragons scattered about them. “You an’ me, Lysander. Our place ain’t among them.” A roughness underscored his voice. “It’s above ’em.” He pushed off the table and walked among his flight. Firelight danced over his impressive outline, lighting half of him up while casting his other half in shadow. As human, his dragons lifted their gazes to

him, some looked away, looked down, anywhere but at Rhadgar as he passed them by.

Lysander watched closer. They weren't turning away. They were offering their necks. And when he reached those as dragon, the beasts rolled onto their sides, exposing their bellies. He didn't have to say a single word, didn't look at them, didn't acknowledge them at all. The message was clear. Here, Rhadgar was king.

Lysander watched until the shadows swallowed the strange, alluring emerald whole. Only when he was surely gone did the dragons return to their group, talking, lounging, eating as though nothing had happened.

Elisandra had never commanded such utter respect and devotion. She ruled by viciousness. Dokul ruled by brute force. And these lands, they *had* been wild. Lysander had seen the maddened dragons here. So how had Rhadgar tamed them?

Lysander lifted his gaze to the stars. He didn't want to be here. He wanted to be south, among the smell of pine and earth and Eroan. He wanted to be in the forest again, with Eroan pulled against him, but what he wanted could never last, not while Lysander was weak. Rhadgar wasn't weak. An emerald. A king.

Lysander needed those answers and then maybe he'd be able to protect the future he so badly wanted with the elf he loved.

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CHAPTER 8



Eroan

THE CAMP QUICKLY TOOK SHAPE. Stone huts had their roofs thatched with dried river reeds. The long summer days blurred into one another, and still no dragons.

Eroan didn't know what to make of their absence. It felt too quiet, and while the others saw it as a blessing and a sign the world was changing, he couldn't shake the sense that when the storm broke, it would do so quickly, and the results would be devastating. Patrols continued, venturing farther afield. The humans' scavenged items were quickly put to good use, like plastic pipes, brittle with age, but suitable for diverting water into the camp. A spring had been found using divining rods, and they'd even managed to clear an area for crops.

The camp would make a fine home and would soon need a name, but Eroan avoided such questions. His absence in these matters was noticed, and yet he couldn't bring himself to settle like the others. They were here because of him, but he didn't want to be here at all. With no dragons to fight and no clue as to Lysander's whereabouts, he was adrift without direction, an assassin without a purpose, and it was quietly driving him insane.

Old habits reared their head. He wanted to leave, to keep moving, but couldn't. Somehow, some time ago, he'd become a leader, an *elder*, of all

things. The people looked to him for answers. He couldn't walk away from them no matter how he often woke at night, soaked in cold sweat, hearing chains rattling against cold stone walls.

When the shout went up that a dragon had been found, relief had him reaching for the dragonblade. And then guilt. He wanted the fight, the blood, the rawness of it all. He *needed* it.

But the dragon he approached now had been dead for weeks. A bronze. He'd expected a jeweled this far north, but there was no mistaking the dragon's metallic scales, even bloated and distorted with decay.

"A nest..." Nye said, standing on the mound above an opening on the ground.

Eroan joined him and peered down inside at the smashed remains of dragon eggs. The bronze had been attacked and killed protecting her eggs, the kits eaten.

Eroan scanned the skies. Dragonless, as always. By Alumn, he wanted to see something, just a hint, so he could hunt it down and do what he was trained to do. Without a word, he sighed and started down the mound.

"We should move camp," Nye said, jogging down to Eroan's side. "Tonight."

"I don't see why. This happened weeks ago. We're miles away. We've seen no evidence—"

"The dragon that did this could be close by."

It wasn't. They'd smell it. But Nye was acting like he *knew* it was.

"Oh shit—I mean, er, damn, that's Mirann." Seraph crouched beside the dragon's snout. Flies and wolves had been at the carcass. The body was badly mangled. It seemed unlikely Seraph would recognize it.

"Mirann..." Eroan knew the name. "From the Bronze chief's brood?"

"Oh by Alumn..." Seraph stood and backed away, getting an overall look at the scene. "Lysander was here."

"You don't know that," Nye said, too quick to dismiss.

"Yeah, I do." She snapped back. "Mirann was..." Her gaze snagged Eroan and she reassessed her words. "It was complicated. I picked up on bits of it when I was at their warren. Mirann was mated to Lysander." She frowned at Eroan, catching the alarm in his expression before he hid it. "It wasn't by choice."

Eroan nodded, urging her to continue, ignoring the way her revelation reopened old wounds. He'd known, hadn't he? Elisandra had called it a

coupling. The queen had been desperate to trade Lysander off. “How do you know it’s Mirann?”

“The crown. I recognize it. I saw her as dragon when I was at the bronze warren. It was rumored she carried Lysander’s eggs.” Her attention drifted toward the nest opening and the shattered bit of shell. “Oh no, those were his...?”

Eroan hadn’t known the extent of it and he certainly hadn’t known of any eggs. And it shouldn’t matter. But it did. Lysander had a mate. He’d been here. With Mirann. Free to raise a clutch of eggs like a dragon would. Alumn, he felt the ache in his heart like a betrayal. He knew he shouldn’t. Lysander was dragon. He’d said it often enough. And this was what dragons did. But a nest? Eggs?

“Then that’s why he left, to return to his kind,” Nye said, echoing Eroan’s conclusion. “So much for love,” he uttered, passing by Eroan so only he heard.

Lysander hadn’t said anything about a mate, but the three days they’d had together had been over too soon. There hadn’t been time to talk. Or maybe he’d always intended to leave and that moment between them in the woods had been a goodbye. But that didn’t make sense. Lysander hadn’t behaved like he’d been planning on leaving. He’d *wanted* to stay. Or had that been wishful thinking on Eroan’s part?

“There are tracks leading north,” Seraph said.

Eroan barely heard her. Lysander had a brood. Or would have had. Dragons weren’t elves. Eroan knew that. They didn’t care for their young or each other. So then, why had Lysander stayed?

“Eroan?” Seraph approached him, her face full of concern. Like Lysander, she didn’t know how to hide her thoughts from her eyes.

“Yes?”

“The tracks?”

Dragon tracks. A dragon walking. Not flying. Lysander had been here and he’d left, heading away from Cheen, away from Eroan.

“Maybe it’s not what it looks like.” *Like he’d left.* Seraph’s soft words pulled his thoughts back around to the here and now.

Eroan adjusted the blade against his back and looked north, between the towers, and into the distance. The tracks were old. Eroan was weeks behind him. “I have to know.” But he couldn’t leave the camp. Wasn’t that what Nye had accused, that Eroan always left? His heart told him to go, but his

head demanded he stay. He was looking for a fight, a mission, something to keep him breathing. And it was a selfish desire.

He found Nye's figure toeing through the eggshells, hearing his harsh words all over again.

"Maybe he had no choice, Eroan," Seraph said, stopping beside him. "She was horrible, like all bronze. He wouldn't have chosen to come here, to her. There's no way he'd leave you for her. Don't listen to Nye."

But Lysander had a clutch of eggs. Maybe that meant something to dragons? And now the eggs were all smashed. Had Lysander done that? Had he killed Mirann? Or had something else happened here? There was old, dried blood on the ground. Was he wounded? The evidence was strewn about them.

Eroan reeled from the questions. After so long, to find something of Lysander, only to have it slip away again. He rubbed at his forehead and shut all the questions down, gritting his teeth.

"I want to go after him, Seraph, but I can't," he said, whispering between them. Too many lives relied on him staying. He couldn't abandon these people. *His* people. Nye was right. He'd walked away too many times. But by Alumn, he wanted to go north.

"I could go." Her expression caught up with her idea and her eyes widened. "I'll go find him. I can track him. He can't fly. It'll be easy." She anticipated Eroan's denial and narrowed her eyes, planting a hand on her hip. "I'm doing this. You can't stop me. I owe him. You wouldn't let me go to France when I knew he was in trouble, but I can do this." Hesitating, he saw the moment she thought she'd said too much. "Let me do this?"

The North was no place for a lone elf, but he trusted Seraph. She would find Lysander. And then Eroan would have his answers. If Lysander truly had chosen to leave, then he'd live with the dragon's choice. If he'd been forced north, Seraph would discover that too. She was the perfect assassin to send. "All right, but Trey goes with you."

"Oh, c'mon. I don't need—"

"Trey goes with you or you don't go at all."

"Fine." She puffed her bangs from her eyes. "But he'll only slow me down."

CHAPTER 9



Lysander

LYSANDER WOKE SURROUNDED by bodies and did not remember falling asleep that way. Memories of the bronze crowding close, pushing in, suffocating, rattled his scales, and the bodies pressed close eased off, allowing him to breathe again. After Rhadgar had disappeared last night and quickly learning that none of the dragons as human wanted to speak with him, he found a quiet corner of the meadow to curl up in. He'd assumed it would stay quiet. But now it was morning, and he'd gained six companions, noses and tails tucked in, wings loose and bellies exposed. If they hadn't been so tightly packed, he'd probably have scrabbled away.

A warm, rough tongue rode up his hind leg. He swung his head around and growled at the diamond. The same one who had tried to nip him before. She blinked big, pale blue eyes and withdrew.

If he'd had a voice, he'd have told them he wasn't theirs to tuck in, and he didn't want them getting close. But as scale rattling and growling weren't doing anything but stirring them in their sleep, he shoved his nose against them instead, prodding them awake.

Rhadgar eventually saved him by way of a bark that stirred them all awake and slowly, painfully slowly, they each stretched and rolled, plodding away to greet their chief—their *king*. Lysander watched it all unfold. The rubbing against him, the way they offered their long necks.

Rhadgar's attention lingered on a few of the females who seemed eager for him to mount them, but soon drifted back to Lysander, now alone in the flattened grass. Lysander snorted a forced smile full of teeth. This would be where Rhadgar made him watch him fuck his females. He expected it. Elisandra had used sex to declare her power, and now this northern king would do the same.

But instead, Rhadgar shook off the affection and took to the wing, blotting on the low morning sun. Jealousy coiled in Lysander's gut. If he had his wing, he could fly like that again. He hadn't missed it so much with Eroan, but here, among his own, he was reminded at every turn of the half thing he'd become. Alone, he tried to stretch the wing, but it had seized long ago. The damn thing wouldn't open.

The diamond was back. Almost pure white, her scales were so smooth and translucent they could have been skin. He'd never seen a diamond up close and admired her approach. She was slim, much slimmer than most dragons, but feather-like. She could probably soar for hours.

She blinked, opened her jaws, and let her tongue loll out.

Lysander rolled his eyes and turned away, but she followed, galloping around him to stand in his way.

Clearly she wasn't going to give up.

He snapped at her, making her shy away. Good. Whatever this was, he didn't want it.

She stood on his tail but when he turned to unleash a roar, she'd already sprung back, front end down, ass up, wings tucked in and eyes big.

He'd played the same with Amalia.

The diamond turned and ran.

Lysander's dragon heart leaped, but as much as old instincts demanded he chase, he sat on his haunches and stayed put. When she realized he wasn't following, she padded back and took up the same posture as before. This went on until the sun had arched high in the sky and her bouncing had thrown up enough grass pollen to cloud the air. Lysander sneezed. He didn't see her move. She hit him in the side, and maybe it was just a game to her, but not to him. He had his teeth in her throat and her body pinned beneath him before she could flutter away.

The primal, dark part of him wanted to finish it. Take, bite, own, fuck.

Other dragons swooped in overhead, screeching a warning, and it only made him want to finish her more. She moved, panting beneath him, her

fear sweet and intoxicating. Maybe he should take this one from Rhadgar the same way the king took Mirann.

Rhadgar approached, as the man, not the dragon. A wise move. Had he tried to fight Lysander off, Lysander would have killed the diamond. But even as man, the emerald had authority. The sense of his strength quieted the dragons that had circled in close and Lysander too. Lysander pulled his teeth from the diamond's neck and let her up. Rhadgar slid his gaze to her and something passed between them. "He's not ready," he said.

The diamond whimpered and limped away, blood streaking her pale scales.

With his blood pumping, Lysander almost wished Rhadgar would act on the tension clearly running through his veins. They were emerald, they both thought the same way. Rhadgar *wanted* to fight. Maybe even missed it. But instead of shifting, the emerald king walked away, like he had the night before, like nothing had happened.

Lysander growled at the rest of them and watched them all slink off through the grass.

Later, Lysander sought out the diamond again, but this time as man. She stayed as dragon and watched him approach. Her wounds had scabbed over. Lysander made an effort not to look at them. "About earlier... I'm not like the others here. If you come at me, I'll fight you. I lived in a place where if you don't fight, you die."

She seemed to understand, but without a human face with human emotions, he couldn't know for sure.

"Will you shift and speak with me?"

She tucked her nose under her tail and closed her eyes. A clear sign to be left alone. He wandered the vast nest. It wasn't even a nest, not really. More of an entire territory. There was no tower, no central seat of power. Rhadgar mingled among them, but he also seemed apart from them in the same way Lysander was apart from them. None would speak with him, not really, and by the evening, he began to wonder about leaving.

Alone, near the edge of the meadow, on a high knoll, he watched the dragons mingle, feeling a sense of loss. The only place he'd felt he belonged among dragons was with Amalia and that was so long ago now it could easily be a dream, like his dreams of the Silver dragon calling to him.

A scuffle broke out between an onyx and an opal. Lysander didn't see what started it, but Rhadgar was among them within seconds. He clapped

his jaws together at one, but the other, when he swung his glare on the onyx, it dropped without him having to do any more than just look it in the eyes. Lysander might have thought no more of it, but Rhadgar didn't let the opal up. He stalked in close, the two dragons locked inside the other's gaze and Lysander felt it then, the small tug on the center of him in the same place he used to shift. A twitch really, nothing more, but from across the field, Rhadgar suddenly looked up and over, pinning Lysander with that very same stare, and the twitch became a thudding, beating, second heart of power. Not Lysander's, but similar and strong enough to almost pull the shift right out of him.

Rhadgar's gaze.

There was power in it. True power, not just dominance. Power like Lysander's mother had. The same power he'd tapped into when he'd killed her.

He needed to know more.



RAINCLOUDS GATHERED IN THE DISTANCE. Lysander could smell it in the air. As dragon, he sniffed, tasting the baked meadows and scenting Rhadgar beside him. The emerald had urged him to follow, and it seemed they had walked for hours through the long, undulating landscape.

When the rain began tapping the grasses, Rhadgar shifted to man and Lysander did the same, curious as to why he'd been brought all the way into the middle of nowhere.

Rhadgar stroked the waist-high, waving grassheads. "Without yah wing, you're severely disadvantaged."

Lysander rolled his shoulder and straightened his back. "Do you need me to answer or is that just an observation?"

Rhadgar's jaw fluttered. He lifted his gaze to the approaching storm. "Your entire life, you've been told you're worthless, eh?"

"What of it?"

"She tried to kill you." The other emerald turned his gaze on Lysander, and now that he knew what to look for, Lysander felt the strange weight of it. Mirann had said something to him weeks ago, something about his gaze? Was that where Rhadgar's power lay?

“And clearly failed,” Lysander finished for him.

“You has power inside you. It’s been choked your entire life, but it’s there.”

All of this seemed too surreal. Lysander waited, keeping his face blank even as his pulse raced. “Whatever power I should have had is clearly broken or else I would have used it by now.”

“You have used it,” Rhadgar said. “Probably without realizing. Have you found lesser dragons sometimes become submissive around you? Pliable?”

Lysander laughed, remembering how he’d fought for every breath as a kit, and later, fought the ranks of the lowers to become their flight leader and the queen’s most skilled guard. “No.”

Rhadgar conceded with a shrug. “Nay, fact remains, you survived. An emerald among amethysts. That ain’t no easy thing.”

“I had help.” He’d had Carline to help him heal. Akiem too. His brother had never left him. There had been times Akiem *could* have killed him and hadn’t. Times he’d wondered if his brother did care, under all the amethyst shit. He’d gotten close, but never taken that final bite. The sword through the chest beneath the tower had been a mistake.

“Your life is a lie.” Rhadgar straightened up to him, standing eye-to-eye, and there was no denying that this northern king’s eyes dazzled. “They tried to ’ave you killed—they’ve killed us all in the past—because we are stronger than every single one of ’em. Whether tis a glitch in our jeweled genes or if we was always meant to rise above ’em, it dunnae matter. They kill us when we’re young because they know we’re above ’em. We are their kings.”

Power. Lysander had never had power over others. Only Elisandra had that. But Rhadgar’s charismatic words weren’t so easily dismissed. Hadn’t he wished his whole life that he could be different, that he could be strong, that he had control? This emerald’s words were seductive, luring Lysander in. He tried to guard himself against the spell in them, but it was becoming harder and harder to remain detached. He wanted to believe this strange red-haired man with his honeyed words. “How did you stop the fight? I saw you quell it. The opal just... backed off. It wasn’t dominance, it was more than that. I *felt* it.” Lysander pressed two fingers to the spot beside his heart. “Inside.”

Rhadgar breathed in and continued his walk through the grass. “The humans once told of how we bespelled ’em.”

“Myths.” Lysander followed in the path the male cut.

“But part of the myth is real. You and me—*emeralds*—we have the power to control our own kind.”

It was fantasy. It had to be. This dragon was insane, likely driven mad up here in this long expanse of nothingness.

“Think I’m lying, eh?” Rhadgar flashed a coy look over his shoulder.

“I don’t know what to think.” Lysander had seen the way dragons behaved around him. He *had* power. But Lysander didn’t believe that same power extended to him. It couldn’t.

“When you killed the queen, what d’yah you feel?”

Lysander ran his hand over the grass and listened to the fat raindrops tapping all around them. “Like I was rising up, not falling. Like I was something else than what I’d been before. I didn’t feel like myself. I felt... bigger.”

“You tapped into that part a you born to rule.”

Lysander laughed. Rhadgar wouldn’t say that if he truly knew what it had been like in the tower.

And now Lysander knew this was nonsense. He was just the runt, youngest of Elisandra’s clutch. Broken and wrong in all ways.

He stopped walking. The rain fell heavier now, soaking through his hair and dripping from his bangs. He swept his hair back and eyed Rhadgar as the dragon turned to regard him too. Maybe this dragon king was right about it all but one single thing. Lysander could not be the things he spoke of. Not now. He’d been too long kept beneath Elisandra, and then Dokul. He’d survived, that was all. With a broken wing and heart. He couldn’t fly, he couldn’t somehow control his kin. Just like Elisandra had said: he was nothing.

“It’s time I returned south.”

“Ain’t nothing there for you.”

“There is something.” He turned and whispered, “Someone.” He just wanted to go back to Cheen, to Eroan. He deserved that, didn’t he? Nothing else mattered. Dragons and myths and kings and control. He didn’t want any of it. What he wanted was to be in the forest with Eroan there beside him. Everything was simple there. He’d danced with elves and as silly as it

seemed, he wanted that again. It had only been a moment of light in a whole lot of darkness, but that moment showed him how things could be.

A dragoncall split the sky like thunder.

Lysander looked up. The beast was huge. Bronze. Old. With a wingspan twice his. Fear tried to rip all sense from him. It wasn't Dokul, but it might as well have been. Out here, in the open, Lysander was exposed.

He turned to Rhadgar, but the spot where he'd been standing in the grass was empty.

"Shit..."

The dragon called again, circling above, zeroing in on Lysander. There was nowhere to hide, just the long grass, but the dragon had already seen him.

Lysander ran. Heart and legs pumping, he ran through the cutting grass, sensing the weight of dragon bearing down.

The beast swooped overhead. Lysander dropped to a crouch in the grass. Fucking Rhadgar. Where was his power now? It was all horseshit; Lysander had known it. At least he'd have the knowledge of being right when the bronze tore into him.

Fuck it.

He wasn't running from this. From the bronze.

He shifted, filling into scale and claw and stoking the fire in his heart, and when the bronze next flew in, Lysander let loose the flame, blinding the bronze mid-flight. It hit the ground with a thunderous thud and tumbled, wing over wing, taking out great swathes of meadow. Lysander would have torn into it then if Rhadgar hadn't suddenly appeared. The emerald lunged in, stealing Lysander's kill. He clamped a foot on the bronze's neck and held it down. Lysander rounded on the king, but his growls fell away. The bronze lay still, panting and huffing, locked in a battle of wills beneath Rhadgar's gaze. Rhadgar's rumbling growls drove home the power of that stare, drilling down, until impossibly, the massive bronze fell limp and dropped its head. Rhadgar pushed off and the bronze stayed on its side, belly exposed and head down.

Shit, it shouldn't have been possible. Bronze were all rage and lust, barely controllable, and yet Rhadgar had subdued it without a fight.

Rhadgar shifted and said, "He's yours." He gestured at the bronze.

Lysander could kill him, and he probably wouldn't defend himself, but a bronze that size might prove useful, not least because he may know where

Dokul was keeping Akiem.

Lysander backed up, signaling the fight was over, and as the skies opened, dumping waves of rain over them, he followed the bronze and Rhadgar back across the plains, thinking on all the possibilities. Rhadgar had subdued the bronze with little more effort than a stern glare. If Rhadgar was right, and Lysander could do the same, then he would finally be the one in control. And everything would change.



THE BRONZE HAD SHIFTED to human. His metal ornaments tinkled and glittered in sunlight. Not as big as Dokul, he still had the chief's heavy and cumbersome build. Lysander had deliberately forgotten how their physicality was just as much a threat as their viciousness. But now, tucked in a natural bowl-like depression in the earth, with Rhadgar placed strategically between him and the bronze, he couldn't escape the memories.

His name was Boder, and he'd eyed Lysander with a small smile ever since returning to the meadow.

Rhadgar sat himself on a boulder, like he had when Lysander had first seen him. He seemed to be waiting for something and was in no hurry to speak.

Lysander leaned against a quarried-out wall of stones, keeping his arms folded, and stayed quiet too. It was good Rhadgar was between them or else he may have already tried to kill the bronze for that fucking smile.

"You know who he is?" Boder grunted, nodding toward Lysander while addressing Rhadgar. Rhadgar blinked back at him as though he'd forgotten the bronze existed. "Dokul's bitch."

Rhadgar was off the rock with jeweled reflexes and staring the bronze down. It didn't matter he was half the male's size, the bronze still ducked his head, then dropped to his knees, stopping short of rolling over and showing his substantial gut.

By diamonds, Lysander witnessed Rhadgar's gift and still didn't believe it.

"What he is," Rhadgar posted behind him at Lysander, "is a darn sight better than you. Forget that and I'll let 'im tear your throat out as he has

been clearly wantin' to since you trespassed." Rhadgar wrapped a hand around the bronze's thick throat. "Why are you here?"

"*Do-kul*," the male wheezed, eyes bulging.

"What of him?"

"*Wants... land. Wants ... prince and brood.*"

Lysander rubbed at his face and looked skyward. Of course Dokul wanted him. Only death would stop the Bronze chief. When the chief learned Mirann was dead, and so was the clutch of eggs, he would rage. He'd tear the whole world apart looking for Lysander.

Rhadgar threw the bronze down and stood over him, making sure he stayed down. "If this 'ere metal returns to the Bronze an' tells 'im you're dead, your clutch gone, would that please you?"

Lysander couldn't hide his surprise. Why? Why would Rhadgar do this for him? Only Eroan had been kind in the same way, and with Eroan it was different. Rhadgar didn't look at him the same way. His wasn't about attraction, or even control, or some twisted amethyst trick, so why then? Lysander swallowed, trying to think his way around what had to be a trap. What did Rhadgar gain from helping him?

"You can make him do that?" Lysander asked quietly.

Rhadgar's smile broadened. "I can make him do anything I want."

"Anything?"

"Any—damn—thing."

"Could you have him return to Dokul and kill him?"

Rhadgar's smile didn't fade, but it did subtly change, becoming darker, like his eyes had. "I can command it, but he'd fail. Dokul an' the bronze would come 'ere searchin' for you." Rhadgar crossed the small distance between them. "Do you really wish for another to strike that killin' blow, denying yous a chance at vengeance?"

How did this male know Lysander's own mind so accurately? "No."

Rhadgar gripped Lysander's shoulder and held it. "Nay. Let the past go. You are stronger than the creature you were before."

It would be too easy to believe it. He ached to believe this emerald's promises. To have the dragons beneath him. All of them. The power of it. He could taste it, victory, dominance, the terrible hunger finally sated, and by the great ones, he wanted it.

"You're both fucking insane," the bronze grumbled from his knees.

Rhadgar whirled, murder in the dragon's eyes. Lysander dashed between them and lifted his hands, blocking Rhadgar. For a breathless second, the emerald king looked back at him, through him, all beast and nothing human, but in a blink, the threat vanished. There was a real dragon inside that man.

"Not yet," Lysander said, and again, softer, "Not yet." Rhadgar eased off, but had he been dragon, his tail would have been lashing. The emerald's eyes shone their warning, and inside, Lysander felt that strange power build, that part of him he used to heal, to shift, but also to kill. Then he realized Rhadgar couldn't control him like he did the others. He'd likely tried, several times. Lysander had felt him try, but whatever spell his gaze cast didn't work on him. That was knowledge worth holding on to.

With Rhadgar taking himself back to his rock, Lysander turned and crouched in front of the bronze.

"Where's my brother?"

Boder sneered. "Under Dokul. Being fucked night and day, punished for not being you."

Lysander had known what would happen but that didn't make hearing it any easier. "Is he..." The question died on his lips. No, Akiem wasn't well. He'd been with Dokul for weeks now. Dokul would break Akiem, if he hadn't already. Lysander tasted bronze on his tongue, like blood. He remembered all too easily the weight of Dokul on his back, the burn of physical pain as the male took him again and again. Eroan had saved Lysander. Akiem had no such savior.

"You can't do what he can," Boder nodded at Rhadgar. "You're broken, just like the rumors said. If you return to Dokul, he'll take you in, might even go easy on you. But if you wait, and he finds you, he'll fuck you until you beg for death."

Well, it was nothing he hadn't expected to hear. "Where are the bronze?"

"In the southwest, where land meets the ocean on three sides. Go to him, prince. He owns you. You are br—"

"What of Carline, the Gold? Is she with him?"

"She's been in the wind since the tower fell."

Carline left, and strangely that hurt more than the bronze's threats. He had harbored a foolish hope that she might try to find him, to explain why she'd had him find the gem and if she truly could heal his wing. But now

she was gone and maybe it had all been a ruse to free herself, just as Akiem had said.

The bronze, that life, it seemed a long way from these jewel-speckled meadows where dragons frolicked unmolested. He felt as though he should go, for Akiem, for revenge, but it meant leaving this unexpected haven. A haven he was beginning to believe in. Things *were* different here.

Lysander stood and glanced at Rhadgar. The male was perched back on his rock, eyes hard and sharp. He nodded once.

Lysander looped his arm around the bronze's neck, viper-fast, and pulled, locking the big male against his thighs. He squeezed. The bronze thumped at his leg, clawed at his chest. It didn't matter. Lysander needed this to happen. The power and rage and desire and lust and all of it built inside like it always did. He pulled harder, muscles burning, and rocked with the bronze's efforts to push him off, until the male slowed, until his clawing hands fell to his sides and his body weight dropped. And still, Lysander held him, needing to be sure. Gods, vengeance, power, the dragon in him wanted to roll in the kill.

He dropped the body and kicked it over onto its back.

He almost shifted, almost let loose the roar trying to claw its way out of him. Instead, he looked up at the dragons scattered about the lands. Dozens of them. Almost a hundred that he knew of. Each of them under Rhadgar's control.

A powerful flight.

An opportunity.

Rhadgar joined him and snarled down at the carcass. "Metals are the old-world. We are the new." He met Lysander's gaze. "You're beginning to learn."

Oh, he understood all right. Rhadgar was dangerous in a way that Elisandra and Dokul never had been. He had true power over all dragons, but here, it was wasted. These dragons weren't fighters. Under Lysander, they could be. And when Dokul came looking, Lysander would finally bring the bronze beast down.

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CHAPTER 10



Eroan

EROAN JERKED AWAKE, heart already racing. Shadows crowded his small stone-built dwelling. Embers simmered in the fireplace grate. He'd fallen asleep atop the covers, half-dressed, exhausted and aching from helping build additional buildings, a wood and grain store.

He watched the embers glow, waiting for his heart to calm. He'd dreamed of dragons. A great wave of them rising up, drowning the world in flame.

A shrieking dragoncall split the night, suddenly bringing the dream into the dwelling with him. Throwing on a shirt and grabbing his blade, he was outside in two strides. His people knew what to do. They'd planned for this. Most had already begun dumping green brush on the fires to instantly snuff them out. Eroan scooped up a pile of leaves and grass and tossed it on the fire nearest him. Smoke, the dragons might miss, but a flame in the dark was an open invitation.

Humans and elves moved silently, extinguishing lamps, until the camp that had become home fell to complete darkness.

Another piercing call barreled overhead.

Eroan looked up.

There was no moon tonight and clouds had stifled the stars, but he could see movement and hear the great *whoomph* of sweeping wings. The

dragonblade sat heavy on his back.

More calls joined the first.

Bronze. He couldn't say how he knew, but he sensed it was them. And they were heading north in the direction Lysander had gone weeks before, and Seraph too.

The calls faded into the distance but the tension of seeing dragons again after so long without them lingered in the air.

"The danger has passed," Eroan assured those who lingered. "Go back to your homes. Rest well. I'll be watching." He repeated the same over and over. Order elves and Chloe's warriors were patrolling. If any bronze had seen the settlement and returned, they'd have ample warning.

Nye carved his way through the blurry-eyed crowd, heading straight for Eroan. "We should leave," he said, keeping his voice low. "We are exposed here. We should return to the forests of the south."

Returning south would put them well within Cheen's territories. Returning south meant moving farther away from Lysander. Returning south meant Eroan could easily find his head on the block and a blade's edge against his neck.

Eroan steered Nye to a sheltered spot tucked away behind two vacant huts, their occupants on patrol. The whole settlement didn't need to hear his dissent. "We have something good here. I'll not abandon it because of one flyby. There have been no encounters, Nye. We're safe here. These people are safe here."

"For how much longer?" Nye stepped back as far as the cramped space allowed. He threaded his fingers through his hair, pulling it back from his face. "Those were bronze. They're probably looking for that *Mirann*. If they find her carcass and scent us, they'll come here." He pointed at the ground. "To us. They'll find us."

"There's no reason to believe that—"

"They will come." Nye snapped. "I know they will. I knew they'd find us. After we left Cheen I thought... I thought it'd be over. There was no reason for them to go to Cheen. She had him—" Nye bit off his own words, sighed, and fell back against the outside of the hut. When he next spoke, a haunted look shadowed his gaze. "Alumn, there had to be a hundred bronze in that flight."

And the flight was going north. "Just a patrol." But Eroan wasn't sure he believed it.

Eroan should have been trekking north. He could still go, leaving Nye in charge. They'd had their disagreements, but Eroan respected the male's skill as an assassin leader. He was perhaps too rash to lead a whole settlement, but it would only be temporary. And Chloe was here to help temper him.

But it didn't matter what argument he came up with, he couldn't leave. There was a slim chance the bronze would double back. He always left too many unfinished things behind him. He had to see this through.

"She had who?" Eroan asked, Nye's words finally sinking in. Something else he'd said came back to him too, before they'd startled the emerald dragon. Nye had mentioned, "*They turned on you because they finally saw the real Eroan Ilanea and all it took was a tree burning to do it.*"

Nye's presence so close in the dark between the huts took on a new weight, one more sinister.

Eroan staggered back, bumping against a wall. "To do what?" he muttered, but fear gripped him as he knew the answer, and Nye looked over, hearing the words, feeling the change in them. "You burned the tree..." Even as Eroan spoke, he denied it inside. No elf would do such a thing. And yet Nye's dark eyes widened and his sneer twitched.

Nye lifted his chin. "Someone had to do something to stop you from killing us all."

"You burned Alumn's tree... as a distraction." The pieces slotted into place, one after the other. "Lysander was taken." A thudding started in Eroan's ears, thumping in time with his heart, beating like the drums of war. "Mirann took him and you helped her." Harder, the thudding drummed.

Nye even smiled, like he was proud of what he'd done. "She was going to burn our home. I saved the village. I saved them! Not you!" Nye jabbed at his own chest. "The dragon prince would have turned on us all. He's a monster. You'll see... one day you'll see what he's truly capable of and you'll thank me for saving you too."

Eroan couldn't breathe. The air went in, filling his lungs, but it made no difference, and the thumping in his head grew louder and louder with every beat of his heart.

Nye had him gripped by the arms suddenly, the male's fingers like iron shackles. "This is all... it's some kind of madness that's gripped you," he said, his voice softer. Nye leaned close, his eyes half-lidded. "But I'll not let

you go, Eroan. I'm here for you. I've always been here for you. I know it hurts, but you're not alone. I'll help you through this."

That's what the thumping was, an agony. A betrayal. A sense of wrongness that was trying to pull him down and down. He looked up at Nye, his oldest friend, and no longer knew him.

Nye's mouth was on his, taking what hadn't been given and then his grip switched from Eroan's shoulders to his forearms, trying to back him up against a hut wall. The kiss plundered, reaching where it had no right to go.

Eroan brought his arms up between them and shoved, knocking Nye away. The stolen kiss burned his mouth. He wiped his lips clean. "*Leave.*"

Nye almost came at him again but hesitated. "Eroan... just... think. Cheen is safe. You're here. I'm with you. Look at what you have now. The prince was poisoning you—"

Eroan had the recurved dragonblade blade in his hand. Nye reeled and went for his dagger. He got it free too. Its point pressed into Eroan's side, but Eroan had Nye pinned back against the hut, the blade at his throat. It happened fast, between one heartbeat and the next.

"I don't know what happened to you. I don't know if I should have seen it sooner." Eroan pushed harder, trapping Nye still. He had his free hand around Nye's neck, too, now, and squeezed, smothering Nye's body with his own. "I don't know where it went wrong, Nye. I don't know how to save you."

"I... don't need... saving." Nye wheezed, eyes wide. "You... do."

"You took him from me." Eroan leaned in so damn close he could smell Nye's fear. "You handed him back to the dragons." Alumn, Eroan couldn't think. He wanted to draw the blade cross Nye's throat for what he had done and paint the ground with Nye's blood. But he couldn't, not when Nye was looking at him with sympathy in his eyes. Nye believed he'd been right, and beneath all the rage, Eroan could see it, he could, but he wasn't sure he was strong enough to forgive. Not this.

Nye's blade dug deeper into Eroan's side. Eroan wanted the pain, he almost begged Nye to do it, it would make finishing him so much easier. "Why are you like this?"

"I love you!"

Eroan bared his teeth and leaned close enough to kiss him back. "I don't love you. I have never loved you. We were friends. Now we are nothing. What you've done... I will never forgive it." Nye trembled and breathed

hard through his teeth, his fear becoming anger. Eroan wanted to do more, to make him bleed, to feed the rage. “Your actions are abhorrent and against everything an Order assassin upholds. I hereby strip you of your place among the Order.” Nye shuddered and tried to turn his head from side to side, but Eroan held him firm. “Nye Cadogan, you are dead to me.” He pulled Nye forward and shoved him out into the open where others immediately witnessed. Nye stumbled, but stayed upright and whirled on the spot. “Leave.” Eroan stalked forward, aware of eyes turning toward them, “And if I see you again, I will kill you.”

“Eroan, please...? I love you more than he’s capable of. I’ve always loved you. Don’t do this. Don’t turn me away. I did all of this *for you*.”

“If you truly loved me, you’d have let Lysander and me be.” Eroan pulled a cool breath deep into his lungs and sheathed the dragonblade. “Leave. Go north or south, I don’t care, but never come back to me.”

Tears brimmed Nye’s eyes, but he straightened, and when he lifted his voice, rage had it trembling. “You’re making a mistake!” Nye scanned the group of people, human and elf alike. “You’ll die following him.” He backed away. “Eroan Ilanea is a curse!” He stumbled through them, shoving a few aside, and then he was gone, melted into the shadows.

Eroan prayed to Alumn he never saw Nye again, but a sense of dread told him it wasn’t over. Nye had never given up easily.

“Is everything all right?” Chloe asked, having watched the final blows from the fringes.

“It will be.” Eroan swallowed the heavy bitterness and fought back the desire to scream at the skies. He knew rage and he knew how to turn it into a weapon. “It’s time your warriors learned the way of the Order. We’re going to need the numbers should the bronze—or anyone—return and try to destroy what we have here.” He thought of Alumn’s tree burning, of his kin weeping. Nye had been lucky to escape here with his life. He would not get a second chance.

Chloe’s soft hand settled on Eroan’s arm, so he had no way of hiding how he shook. “Are *you* all right?”

“I will be,” he said, barely keeping the growl contained, “when I get my dragon back.”

CHAPTER 11



Lysander

“TEACH ME.”

Rhadgar merely laughed at that, plucked a flowerhead off the tall, swaying meadow daisies and began to pull the petals off, one by one. “Cannae teach what is already known.”

Lysander folded his arms. “So you just woke up one morning and discovered you could control your kin?”

“More or less.”

He’d learned in his weeks here that Rhadgar was an enigma and a tease. He had all the answers but only shared drops at a time. Lysander was beginning to suspect Rhadgar of deliberately delaying. The dragon was lonely. He shouldn’t be. He had a huge brood to keep him company, but few spoke with him, the same as none spoke with Lysander. Rhadgar controlled them. They lived with that, and him, in a strange kind of mutual truce.

But that wasn’t enough for Lysander.

He’d seen what could be done and by the great ones, he needed to do it too. Nothing this good had ever fallen in his lap. He wasn’t about to let it go. Rhadgar was emerald. Lysander was emerald. So, Lysander had a broken wing. The rest of him worked. Mostly. He *could* do this. He wasn’t leaving this land *until it was done*, as Eroan would say. Lysander wanted to

go back to Eroan stronger, as someone who deserved Eroan Ilanea, not the burden he'd been until now.

And if Lysander could control his kin, he could—would kill Dokul. And more. He could do so much more. Rhadgar was wasting his gift. Lysander would bring all the dragons down and end the war. Alumn had said as much in his dreams.

“So...” Rhadgar began, finished with his flower, he focused on Lysander instead. “...Your whole life, you were controlled. Elisandra and then... Dokul?”

“Yes.” Lysander had no idea if Dokul's treatment of him had reached this far north, but it was likely. Rhadgar knew a great deal for a dragon who didn't exist.

“Well then, it ain't no real surprise you ain't come into your power. They all coveted you, aye? They all wanted a piece of the prince?”

“Yes,” Lysander said again. “I was never told why.”

“But now you see why that was. Can you imagine what would have happened had you learned of your true potential while under Elisandra? I suppose it happened anyway, eventually. She feared you but she wan'ed you. The same as Dokul. The same as your bronze mate. The same as all dragons. They all admire you.”

“How do I learn it?”

“Don't know. It happened early with me. I was to be killed by the queen. I escaped, she sent a flight after me, we fought,” he waved a hand like all of this was unimportant, “they thought me dead. But emeralds are tough bastards an' we *heal*... Also nature's way of making sure we survive. I found my way here an' it just *happened*.”

“It just happened?” Lysander snorted.

“It was just the one dragon to begin with an' when I discovered how easily it submitted I... anyway... it died, I killed it, but I found another an' learned that if I didn't wanna be alone, I should *play well* with others instead of eatin' 'em.”

That sounded more like the jeweled Lysander knew.

“You've seen what I am. I ain't weak. I do not hesitate to kill, but I'm not the *fuck it—kill it* type like the rest of our kin. I'll happen a chance you're the same. Oh, we still have needs, we is dragon, but we ain't mindless in our pursuit of desires, as the metals are.”

Everything Rhadgar said resonated deep inside Lysander's soul. "I wish I'd met you sooner." He'd spoken before realizing he probably shouldn't have.

Rhadgar nodded with an understanding deep in his green eyes. "So do I, prince. So do I."



RHADGAR DISAPPEARED DAILY, and because nobody spoke, Lysander had no idea where the northern king went. Flightless, he couldn't very well follow him. So he often shifted and resigned himself to stalking the dumb cows along the eastern coast, but always at the back of his mind he was aware of time passing and his heart aching.

He wanted to leave, but couldn't, not yet. Not when Rhadgar was talking and telling him things. Showing him things about himself. Showing him a different way.

The diamond pounced when Lysander had his back turned and his eyes on the grazing cattle. He'd had his head down and body flattened in the grass, so focused on the prey he hadn't considered he could be prey too. The diamond was on him, claws sinking in. He swung his head back, tore her off him, and pinned her down, panting through the grip he had on her neck.

It was only then it occurred to him that she hadn't hurt him. Her claws hadn't broken his skin. She'd been playing, and yet again, he'd almost torn her throat out. Well, then it was her damn fault for poking him when she should have known by now to leave him alone.

He released her and grumbled, as much at her as himself. He hadn't smelled her. She'd been downwind. Had she been a bronze, he'd have lasted all of three seconds. It was only because she was lighter that he'd managed to pull her off.

She stayed glued to the ground, but her eyes were big and full of *play*.

He huffed at her. *Fool*. She'd get herself killed.

Play, her eyes pleaded.

These fucking dragons were soft. By diamonds, if she'd been in the tower, she'd have been eaten before making it through a week.

He bared his teeth in warning. She hunched lower.

Lysander hoped that'd be it and scanned the land for prey. And now the cows had moved on, hidden deep in the brush.

He could have stalked them but didn't feel much like it now.

She was still watching him.

Play.

He narrowed his eyes and held her hopeful gaze, testing out that center of him where the magic lived. Nothing happened. And now she was panting, suddenly eager, like his staring had...

Oh by nights, she was into him. He'd missed all the signs because he hadn't been looking for them. Had he been man, he could have told her he wasn't interested but things were more complicated as dragon. Snorting, he shook his head. And then the sweetest of familiar scents tickled across his nose. Pine. Cut wood.

Elf.

The diamond bolted, threading through the long grass like a needle. She moved *fast*. Lysander galloped after her, desperately searching the hills for the source of the scent. Eroan. Could it be? If he were here, Lysander couldn't let the diamond get close. She veered left, breaking her cover, and Lysander plowed into her side, knocking her clean off her feet. Her tail lashed, wrapping around his hindquarters, and they tumbled. She let out a yelp and then Rhadgar was on the ridge, wings spread, fire glowing low in his throat.

Lysander had no wish to fight the king, especially as this all was a misunderstanding. He untangled himself from the diamond and watched her limp off and then Rhadgar filled his view, the glare and growl a clear warning not to fuck with his brood, even if he couldn't pull the control trick on Lysander.

The scent of elf had passed, but Lysander lingered long into the evening, hoping to catch sight of movement among the grass. None came.



“Psst.”

His drifting, half-dreaming thoughts twitched.

A rock smacked him on the end of his nose, stinging where it bounced off scale. He opened his eyes and looked straight at the innocent-looking

boulder ahead. The scent of elf was strong now, even though she had placed herself downwind. The fact she'd gotten this far without waking an entire field of dozing dragons was a miracle.

"Alumn," the elf with an ear-tip missing peeked around the boulder, "you're big up close, huh. Who broke your crown?"

He'd forgotten some part of his crown had broken during the fight with Rhadgar, but that was the least of his concerns in that moment. Seraph was here, and she was going to die before dawn if he didn't get rid of her fast. He considered shifting, but the press of energy could wake those closest to them and he wasn't yet sure how this brood dealt with elves.

Jerking his head, he urged her to move behind an exposed collection of rocks and boulders. It wasn't much but it might be enough to hide her from curious eyes. Soundlessly, she jogged behind the rocks and waited as he moved around, out of sight. Not easy to do. Only once he was sure they wouldn't be seen did he shift.

Seraph blinked into the dark, trying to refocus her night-sensitive eyes. "A little warning next time?"

He pulled her down into a crouch behind the rocks. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Her gaze dropped to the dragon pendant around his neck. "Eroan was nearly killed, we found Mirann's nest, and then we thought you might be hurt and—"

"Wait. Slow down. Is Eroan well?"

"The tree burned. For some stupid reason, they blamed you and because you weren't there—where were you?" She punched him on the arm, barely putting any weight behind it. "Eroan got the blame."

"I wasn't there because your friend Nye drugged me and dumped me with Mirann. Is Eroan all right, Seraph?"

"Yes, he's fine. Bossy and grumpy, so normal. Wait... Nye drugged you? But he..." She paused. "Oh." She didn't seem surprised. "I told you he had a thing for Eroan. Why didn't you see that coming?"

"How?"

She snorted. "And he's not my friend. That's why he was freaking out at the nest... He thought you were close... Wait, *did* you kill Mirann?"

"No. Look. This..." He circled a finger between them. "You can't be here. I don't know these dragons, but they're jeweled. They'll eat you."

"Then let's go. I've come to take you back."

He smiled. Gods, he loved this little elf. She'd trekked all this way for him? "You're something, you know that? But I can't go. There are things happening here... I can't leave. Not yet. Why didn't Eroan come?"

"He... can't. Anye kicked him out, but some of the Order and Chloe's people chose his side, and now they've built a new home and he's there... being Eroan."

He could see it so readily. Eroan was always meant to lead. His people loved him. Well, most of them. The ones who were right. And this was going to be the way of things. Lysander with dragons, and Eroan with elves. It couldn't be another way.

"You have to go to him," Seraph whined. "He thinks you chose to leave."

"I can't." Lysander rested back against a rock. Oh, but he wanted to. Life was easier with Eroan. Everything felt right with Eroan. But if he went back, nothing would change. He would go back, when he was powerful, just like Rhadgar.

"You're meant to be together," Seraph said softly.

She was a fool to think such a thing. "Don't you see?" he asked her. "This is how it will always be. We cannot be together, Seraph. Not yet. We belong to different people."

"You don't belong to anyone. Not anymore. And neither does Eroan. Oh, you're both as stubborn as each other, you know that? He loves you and you love him. It's that simple. You're just making it difficult because you're afraid."

"It's not—"

"And who is this wee thing?" Rhadgar said from above them. He stood atop a rock, one boot resting on a rocky step, his forearm resting on his raised knee. "There are no walls here and no secrets either. Who is your little friend, Lysander?"

The emerald's eyes shone, and a sly, predatory tone in Rhadgar's voice triggered Lysander's instincts. He pulled Seraph behind him, not caring that she hissed at being manhandled. They'd been here before and he had no wish to see a repeat of Dokul's treatment of her. He didn't believe Rhadgar would try to fuck her, but the emerald's interest blazed as plain as day on his face.

"This elf is mine. She's under my protection," Lysander said, too quickly, instantly regretting how easily he'd given away how much he

cared. He'd been so long outside the tower, he'd forgotten how to hide his weaknesses, Seraph being one of them.

Rhadgar's eyes flashed. He dropped off the rock and stalked around them both.

Lysander side-stepped, keeping Seraph behind him and himself between her and Rhadgar. "Don't do this."

"It's just curious. For so long I ain't seen an elf and then I see several in a few weeks..."

"You've seen others?"

"Oh yes. I like to watch 'em."

Lysander swallowed. "Rhadgar... stop." The sounds of dragons stirring awake reached him. Lysander would fight them all to protect her—and probably die. And then she'd die. And for what? Because she'd come to take him back to Eroan. He couldn't allow that to happen. "This elf is mine." He held out a hand, keeping the dragon back. The male smiled, but Lysander knew that smile well. A dragon's smile, full of teeth and want.

"Seraph, you should not have come," he snapped. Dragons prowled into sight. Four, then five, then more.

"I had to." Her voice trembled.

He heard the sound of her freeing the dragonblade, for all the good it would do her. She was prey here and after the dragons were done with her, they'd fight over who got to eat her first.

"Damn it. Run." He shifted, hoping she moved before the true weight of him filled the space she'd been standing in, and now, as dragon, he threw open his good wing and glared Rhadgar down. His brood gathered behind Rhadgar, more and more swelling the ranks.

Rhadgar shifted too and tried to peer around Lysander at the fleeing elf. Lysander snapped his jaws together inches from the dragon's snout and growled a warning. He'd fought Rhadgar for Mirann. But Seraph wasn't Mirann. Seraph was precious. Fire boiled in his throat. He'd die before these dragons hurt her.

"I'm not running, you overgrown lizards!" A small voice said from right near Lysander's left front foot.

He couldn't look, couldn't take his eyes off Rhadgar, who in turn was staring at Seraph like she'd sprouted horns. Rhadgar's eyes narrowed. He didn't like to be told no. Lysander saw where this was headed, and there was no way to avoid it now.

Dragons behind growled their warnings.

Rhadgar lifted his head. His firepit blazed, glowing through his scales, his jaws opened.

Lysander lunged.

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CHAPTER 12



Eroan

“EROAN!”

Eroan pretended not to hear and brought the axe down, cutting the log clean in half.

“Eroan, come quickly!”

Another swing. Another cut. His shoulders ached. Sweat dripped down his back and chest. He grabbed another log.

“Eroan...” The human appeared and stumbled to a breathless halt. “There’s...”

Eroan lowered the axe and blinked some of the coldness from his eyes. They’d started looking at him differently lately, like this one did now. Part awe and part fear. He’d been distant, torn, distracted. *Resentful*. But knowing it had only amplified those things. “What?”

“A dragon. They’ve brought a dragon to the camp. You must come.”

His heart fluttered, coming alive for the first time in weeks. “Is it dead?”

“No.”

“Then kill it and—”

“It’s the black one,” the human spluttered. “The black prince.”

Akiem. Then Eroan would kill the dragon himself. He gripped the axe harder and took the path back toward the village, forgetting the messenger. If Akiem were here, he had to die. To protect the village. But mostly

because Eroan hungered for the bastard's death like little else he hungered for these days. His blood pumped hotter and faster. He needed this. This place, these people, these expectations. They'd eaten him hollow. And now Akiem had landed in his lap. A gift from Alumn, surely.

He broke into the main village clearing and slowed his pace when the crowd parted. Akiem was on his knees, his wrists bound in front of him with simple twine, not nearly enough to hold a dragon, but he wasn't fighting. His long black hair hung in tails over tattered and soiled clothes. Eroan kept walking, his grip warming the axe handle.

Akiem lifted his head.

His eyes, so full of pride and arrogance when he'd ordered a dragon to torture Eroan, had dulled and blurred, turning bloodshot and rheumy. What Eroan first thought to be dirt blackening the dragon's face, revealed itself to be bruises as he drew closer.

Eroan raised the axe.

"*S'il vou plaît*, stop," Chloe gripped his arm, partially blocking the arc the axe would swing through to take the dragon's head. "Don't," she said again. "Look at him, Eroan."

Eroan did, and he saw a killer. A monster. A beast who would kill everyone here and destroy it all the first chance he got.

"He is broken," Chloe said.

Broken. Battered. It didn't matter. Eroan pulled his arm free. "He dies or we die. Is that a choice you want to make?"

"Just..." Chloe eased back under the weight of Eroan's glare. "He could have come as dragon. He hasn't. Just listen."

"Listen?" Eroan grabbed the favored prince by the jaw with his left hand and forced him to look up. "What words can he speak to absolve him of the past? He had me tortured. He had Lysander abused. He burned my home, killed my people." Eroan bowed over and stared into the dragon's dull eyes. "You came to the wrong place if you're looking for mercy. I kill dragons."

"Not all," Akiem rasped. "Not him."

Eroan tore his hand free and forced himself to step back. The axe's weight was a comforting promise in his hand. Taking this dragon's head and raising it on a stake for all dragons to see seemed like a fitting end.

"Speak then. But the words will be your last, so make them good, *dragon*."

“Dokul is coming for Lysander.”

Eroan’s top lip tightened over his teeth. “I cannot trust a word you speak —”

“He has a flight of...” Akiem’s voice cracked, “a thousand, maybe more. More dragons than I’ve ever seen. And he’s coming...” Akiem’s focus strayed, his thoughts wandering. He blinked. His eyes rolled. “I couldn’t... There is no one.” He pitched forward and fell face-down in the dirt.

Eroan flexed his grip on the axe handle. A dozen pairs of eyes looked to him and most of them did so as though wary. Alumn, what was he doing? He drew in a long breath and held it, then sighed it out and pushed the endless anger with it. “Take him to the cave.” They’d discovered it a few days ago. Little more than a hole in the ground. But it would do for a dragon.

Chloe nodded, her chin lifted and mouth firm. Perhaps she thought helping Akiem would ease some of the guilt she felt over failing Lysander. Wherever the kindness came from, Eroan couldn’t help but wonder if it would get her killed, just as Lysander had said it would. “*Your monsters are real,*” Lysander had told her in France. And Akiem was one of them.



“I THOUGHT you were going to take my head,” Akiem said from his nook at the back of the cave. His wrists were still bound in front of him, but he was able to reach for the fruit, bread and water Chloe had left him. He picked at the bread, wincing every time he lifted a small piece to his mouth.

“I still might.” Eroan stayed back, near the cave’s entrance, glancing around the hollowed out rock. The air inside was cool and damp, very much like the air he’d breathed for weeks inside the amethyst tower dungeons. Akiem had ordered him tortured then, and what followed haunted Eroan’s dreams.

Now, here they both were, the black prince in chains, Eroan holding all the power.

Ben ducked inside and came to a sudden halt when his gaze fell on Akiem. “Do you mind if I observe?” He patted his pockets, found his notebook, and plucked the pencil from behind his ear.

“Go ahead,” Eroan said, keeping his tone cool.

Chloe had sent Ben as both an observer and a witness, should Eroan bring an abrupt end to Akiem’s life. She’d discreetly taken his axe and hidden it. Eroan had plenty of other ways to kill Akiem.

Akiem turned his head to the side and vomited up everything he’d eaten in the past twenty minutes.

Eroan locked his jaw, hiding his sneer. Akiem had been beaten, the marks on him were evidence enough, and the bronze would have done more than use their fists. The similarities with how Eroan had found Lysander in France tried to pluck sympathy from Eroan’s heart. But this prince was not worth any regret or empathy.

Akiem’s glances flitted. He kept his head down and picked at the small loaf again, wincing like every breath pained him.

“He came here knowing you’d kill him,” Ben said.

Eroan grunted. These humans were too lenient. Maybe meeting Lysander and seeing how dragons could be had made them that way. “Do not pity him. He’ll harbor no such pity for you.”

Akiem flinched. “It’s true...” he croaked, and then cleared his throat. “The voice... I have been dragon for...” he paused, thinking, “since the tower fell. How long ago was that?”

“Two months,” Eroan answered. He’d planned to say no more than that, but the words wouldn’t be silenced. “Dokul had you for two months. Lysander’s torture lasted much longer, and after I freed him, you caged him with the bronze Mirann. He didn’t tell me, but I knew. He was different after that. Vicious. Raw. That’s on you.”

“No.” The black prince’s tone still held its lofty pride, even now. Eroan’s anger twitched, waking in his blood. “It began before that,” Akiem said. “It began with Elisandra and never ended. He was always vicious. He—we had to be. For all your compassion, elf, you are not dragon. You cannot understand.”

“Why are you here?” If Eroan had to listen to the prince’s sob story he’d go and find the axe again, or maybe his dragonblade. “Tell me why I should keep you alive.”

Akiem slowly chewed a morsel of bread. “I can shift,” he finally said. “Burn your new home down around you.”

“So do it.”

He wouldn't. Maybe he couldn't. Or he'd have done it already. Eroan approached and crouched in the middle of the cave, still a few feet away from Akiem but close enough to look into the dragon's eyes and see everything written there. Pain. If Akiem had endured half of what Lysander had, it was a wonder the prince was functioning at all. Dokul had hurt him in the worst ways, a fate Eroan had narrowly escaped. A fate Lysander had endured. And maybe that was punishment enough for this dragon.

"I helped the elves flee... at the tower," Akiem reminded. "I pushed the bronze back, for all it was worth. What happened beneath the tower... I didn't mean—"

"Your behavior after the tower fell is why we're currently talking like two civilized creatures. But if you so much as look at my people wrong, I don't need an axe to finish you."

Akiem nodded, then pressed the back of his bound hand to his mouth. He panted, breathing too fast, forcing back the sickness. Once he was stronger, how long would it be before he attacked? Eroan should kill him now and be done with him but it wasn't often a dragon landed in one's lap, and while he seemed inclined to talk, Eroan could get answers.

"Does Dokul know where Lysander is?"

Akiem nodded. "The only place he could go. North. The farther north you go, the narrower and colder the land becomes. As my brother is not here, with you, he must be north."

Eroan silently prayed Seraph had already reached him. And maybe, just maybe, they were on their way here?

"Did the bronze send you here looking for him?"

Akiem held Eroan's gaze. "You think he's cunning enough to think of that? To send me here to infiltrate your ranks? Dokul doesn't think. He acts. On everything. He is a brute. If he wants something, he doesn't plot and scheme, he takes it." Akiem shuddered. Closing his eyes, he breathed through his nose, fighting off what were likely waves of nausea. "Rest well, elf. Dokul doesn't know this place exists."

Again, a part of Eroan tried to sympathize. He quelled it by remembering it had been Akiem who had killed almost everyone in the village Eroan had been raised in. He'd captured Seraph and Xena and handed them over to the bronze, causing Xena's death. Akiem was dragon.

"How did you know to find us here?"

“I saw... I was among a patrolling flight, at the front, and... I saw the fires before you quenched them. Don’t fret, I didn’t tell the others. After a time, I doubled back.”

“Will they follow?” Eroan asked, wondering if he’d have to abandon the village after all.

“No. They’re focused on going north, looking for Lysander. They don’t care what happens to me... Dokul does,” Akiem’s gaze defocused. He looked down. “But he isn’t with them. Yet. He’s searching for his daughter, for the eggs.”

“Mirann is dead.” Eroan waited for the reaction. “The eggs too.”

Akiem lifted his head, frowning. “How?”

“Lysander.”

“They were together?”

“We think so.”

He shook his head. The movement must have niggled his throat. He raised a hand and rubbed at the bruises. “Lysander didn’t kill her. We can’t... we can’t kill our mates when there’s a new clutch. Instinct takes over, at least until the eggs are hatched. If it didn’t, we’d eat our young.”

Akiem saw Eroan’s disgusted grimace and smiled. “Are dragons too savage for you, elf? Lysander and I once raided a bronze nest. We devoured all the kits inside, eating them as the weak bronze looked on. Do you tell yourself he’s different, that he’s somehow less dragon because you’ve formed an attachment to him?”

“He chose to be with her?” Eroan asked, steering the conversation away from his relationship with Lysander.

“It’s not something we control,” Akiem said, catching on to Eroan’s thoughts. “Knowing my brother, he would have resisted, but we are what we are. He didn’t choose to be with her, no. We both know why. But the instinct to protect your own brood is undeniable. Do elves not have instincts? Are you not compelled to do some things?”

Eroan half-smiled, deliberately showing a hint of sharp teeth. “Kill dragons.”

Akiem huffed a small laugh. “I thought he’d lost his mind.” He set the bread down and admired Eroan for a few moments. Eroan only let it happen because the dragon’s gaze was a curious one. “Why an elf? I asked myself. He could have taken any dragon he wanted, made a brood for himself,

spawned more amethyst. He only had to hide his... desires, sate himself in secret, and submit to Elisandra at all other times.”

“Like you did?”

An intelligent flicker briefly lit Akiem’s glare. “Lysander isn’t the best at hiding his wants, or anything.” With his visual assessment of Eroan complete, he nodded to himself. “I’m beginning to understand what he saw in you.”

“It’s too late for understanding.”

“You are not so different from dragonkin.” Gold touched Akiem’s dark eyes, turning them from curious to hungry.

“We were talking of Mirann’s death...”

The gold snuffed out. “If Mirann is dead, why is Lysander not here with you?”

“You’re assuming he’s not?”

Akiem snorted. “He doesn’t know how to sit quietly. He would have been here. He would have been here the moment I was brought in.” His eyes narrowed. “You couldn’t tame him, could you. What happened? Did you try to order him?” The dragon tilted his head, looking at Eroan from a different angle. “No, you wouldn’t try to stop him from being himself. I see that too now.” Akiem leaned back against the cave wall and stretched out a leg, wincing with every movement.

Eroan watched, careful to keep his expression guarded.

Ben scribbled his notes, his pencil scratching over creased paper.

Akiem was well known for his intelligence and ruthlessness. All of this could easily be an act. “I ask again, why are you here?”

“I didn’t know you were here, elf. It seems like fate, does it not? Or what do you call her?” he waved a hand. “Perhaps your blessed Alumn had a hand in bringing us together?”

“Only if she wishes you dead.”

Akiem closed his eyes and kept them closed this time. He rested his head back, lifting his chin, revealing dark purple bruises around his neck, telling a story Akiem would never give voice to.

“I have nowhere else to go,” the black prince said.

It must have cost him much to admit that to an elf.

Eroan left the cave. He ordered two guards at the cave mouth night and day but didn’t expect any trouble. Not yet, not while Akiem was weak. Akiem had been honest. Akiem likely didn’t have anywhere else to go, but

it wouldn't last. Dragons were predatory. He'd get hungry for more than bread and fruit soon enough. Eroan planned to kill him before that happened.

A group had gathered in the village center, around where preparations for a well were being dug. In the last few weeks, half a dozen houses had been built. Stone walls, thatched roofs. Built to last. He wanted this settlement to work, and it would, but not with him as their leader.

"The dragon is subdued and unlikely to cause us any immediate harm," he said, raising his voice. His people spilled from inside their homes, drawn by his voice, all looking to him for guidance. *Alumn, forgive me.* He cleared his throat. "We have built a home here, a home worth fighting for. I am proud of that." Some heard the shift in his tone and began murmuring. "But I cannot stay. You all left Cheen because you believe in standing up for your beliefs. Every day I'm thankful for your sacrifice and I carry it with me. But I too must stand by my beliefs. Lysander fought for each of you. He is one of us. He is missing. The bronze flight has increased in numbers. They are heading north, looking for him. I sent Seraph and Trey, but with new information, brought by the black prince, I must go north too."

The pain on their faces would haunt him, but so would not acting in time. He'd delayed before and Lysander had suffered. This was the right thing.

"Chloe will lead you in my absence. I will return with Trey, Seraph, and Lysander. I give you my word on this."

Unlike Cheen, nobody here openly confronted him. All seemed content to let him go, despite a few tears. Better for them to understand this now than cling to an Eroan who didn't exist. He was not their hero. He was not their elder. Those roles belonged to others better than him. But finding Lysander and bringing him home, he *could* do that.

"I'm coming with you." Akiem stumbled against a house wall, his wrist ties broken. The guards flanked him, clearly fearful. Akiem had likely put that fear into them with some form of vicious threat.

Eroan raked his glare over the prince. He was a wreck. As pale as milk and just as weak. If Akiem came, he wouldn't have to worry whether the dragon had recovered and eaten everyone he'd left behind. "You'll slow me down."

"I won't."

"You can barely walk."

The prince swallowed hard. “You told me it was too late for understanding? Not yet, it isn’t.”

“Are you trying to convince me you found some compassion in that black heart of yours?”

Akiem’s cheek fluttered. “I was wrong. I’ve been wrong for a long time.”

He saw it only because Dokul had pounded him into the dirt and he was latching onto the only strong thing he could find: Eroan. “If you come, you keep up. If you hinder me in any way, I will slit your throat as you sleep. You might have found your heart, but I lost mine in that tower. Don’t expect compassion or forgiveness from me, dragon.”

“I won’t hinder you. I won’t slow you. You have my word.”

The useless word of a lying dragon prince. “Fine,” Eroan agreed, looking forward to the moment he left a dragon carcass behind him on the path north.



TRUE TO HIS WORD, Akiem did keep up, but the dragon’s shivering and numbed quiet when resting betrayed the cost of the pace. Eroan couldn’t find it in him to care. Maybe the beast would succumb to his trauma and die without Eroan having to lift a finger to help.

“Why do you not ride horses?” Akiem asked, a day into their trek through brush and hilly wastelands.

“Do you see any horses?” Eroan answered, several strides ahead and keeping up a relentless pace. “It’s almost as though you don’t know dragons ate them all. The only reason there are cows is because you figured out if you ate all the stock, you’d soon run out of food.” Eroan shrugged the blade from his back and used it to cut the animal track wider. The only horses he knew of were those the dragons had kept. Had there been horses, did Akiem think elves hadn’t thought of utilizing them? Did he think elves fools, as dumb as food? Of course he did. He recalled the exact way in which Akiem had looked down on him when they’d first met. Elves were cattle, food, pets.

The sun hung low in the sky to the west. North lay dead ahead, and he wasn’t stopping until he found Lysander. Day and night, mile after mile.

Not even the dragon behind him was going to slow him down. That dragon had fallen quiet these last few miles. Eroan glanced behind.

Akiem flicked his dark eyes up, the strain showing in the new lines he'd gained around his eyes and mouth, easier to spot now beneath the dust of travel.

"You didn't know horses are almost extinct?" Eroan asked. "How sheltered it must be to live a dragon prince's life."

"You don't know anything of my daily torment, elf."

Eroan snorted. "I know enough."

"There are other ways to torment besides that which is visible."

"You'd know."

They marched on until the sun had set and wolf howls started up in the valleys. Eroan built a fire. Taking the firestarter from his pocket, he crouched by the pile of kindling, his thoughts lost as he turned the firestarter over in his hand. If the bronze found Lysander again, Eroan would tear the world apart. That fate could not be allowed to come to pass. But Eroan needed rest. He needed to eat, to fuel himself. He was no good to Lysander exhausted. But by Alumn, stopping ate at his patience, as did the damned dragon on his tail.

Akiem had tucked himself against a thin hazel tree and watched Eroan work, but now the dragon's body had fallen limp, his breathing coming steadier. It wasn't that he trusted Eroan not to kill him, it was more the dragon was clearly drained. After what Dokul had likely inflicted upon Akiem, death was a blessing.

Eroan lit the fire and fed it fuel, nursing it until it was strong enough to take a few bigger fallen branches. The dragon's breathing became labored, and his feverish shivers started up again. His hands clutched at his overcoat until the fingers turned white.

Eroan tore his gaze away and watched the flames. Lysander had said his brother had laughed once. That Akiem had been different. Eroan couldn't see it and didn't want to. They were enemies, and had the dragon been stronger, he'd have already shifted and tried to kill every elf who crossed his path.

The dragon twitched in his sleep and let out a strangled groan.

Let him suffer. Suffering was all Akiem deserved.

If Lysander were here, would he be kind to his brother? Eroan puzzled over Lysander's feelings for Akiem. At times, he'd clearly despised him,

but at others, there had been a fondness in his voice. But it was likely Lysander's familiar feelings weren't reciprocated, at least not until recently. Had Akiem truly come to realize his mistakes? Dragons and their hierarchy were complicated.

Akiem's closed eyes fluttered. His lips pulled back in a silent sneer. Sweat glistened on the male's cheek, dampening his hair, gluing to his face. He'd been a fool to come along. He wouldn't be able to maintain Eroan's pace. The dragon was a liability.

Eroan shifted from his spot by the fire and crouched in front of the feverish black prince. Wherever his head was at, it wasn't a kind place. A blade to the heart would end it now. Eroan removed the blade from his back and tested its weight. Akiem wouldn't see his death coming. It would be over quickly.

Only... this black prince didn't deserve a quick death.

Eroan's mouth twisted. He set the sword down and plucked a piece of rag from his pocket. Dampening it with water from his pouch, he wrung out the excess and pressed the cool cloth to the prince's forehead. The dragon would not be grateful for the care, but if Eroan was to make progress, he needed him fit.

With a heavy sigh, Eroan resigned himself to a night of caring for his enemy.

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CHAPTER 13



Lysander

HE'D THOUGHT the northern dragons tamed. He'd been wrong. They came for him as one, with Rhadgar at the front. Too many. He didn't stand a chance, but he'd hold them long enough for Seraph to escape. Rhadgar came at him first—claw and teeth and flame—fast and as vicious as any amethyst.

Lysander couldn't fly, but by the great ones, he could *fight*. The northern king was bigger, heavier. In Lysander's mind, none of that mattered. He blocked Rhadgar's charge, bringing himself side-on, good wing spread while the other hung limp. The emerald pounced, jaws wide. Rhadgar's teeth sank into Lysander's back, igniting a riot of pain down his spine. He twisted, throwing the emerald off. It didn't last. Rhadgar came in again, striking like a whip. They clashed, slashing and snapping jaws. Since Mirann, this had been coming, and maybe Lysander had let Rhadgar have that fight, but no damned dragon was getting past him to Seraph.

Another dragon lunged, eager to get in on the fight. Rhadgar snapped at it—claiming the fight as his.

Rhadgar was distracted.

Lysander searched the fields for Seraph. He spotted her, a tiny thing among the meadow grass with a male elf beside her. He knew the male, but

in that moment couldn't place his name. Seraph wasn't alone and she was fleeing. That was all that mattered.

Teeth tore Lysander's neck. The roar that pealed out of him sounded like nothing he'd given voice to before. He whirled on Rhadgar. The emerald king's eyes glowed their multifaceted green. Dragons scattered. Some going after Seraph.

Chaos and claw. Too much. Too fast.

Lysander lunged at any and all, but he didn't have Rhadgar's power to control, and the dragons galloped on, some taking to the air. One took flight beside him. He caught its rear leg, yanking it to the ground.

Pain washed up his left hip. This time, Rhadgar's bite crunched something vital and Lysander tripped. Another dragon roared and plowed in, trying to take a bite out of Lysander's useless wing. Rhadgar was there suddenly; vast mountain of green scales shoved against him as the king blocked his subject's attack. Weight shoved over Lysander. Rhadgar's weight... memories flashed—bad ones, bronze ones. This wasn't the bronze nest, but it felt like it. Wild, mindless panic gripped Lysander's thoughts. He thrashed and tore and loosed all the flame, and briefly, in the raging madness, it seemed to work. The weight vanished; the screaming stopped. But Rhadgar had left him for another reason. Green wings spread; the king taking flight—toward Seraph.

No, no!

Lysander couldn't follow.

He couldn't damn well follow! He tried to shove onto his legs, to gallop forward, but the numbness had him falling over his own feet. It was too late. He scanned the meadow. He couldn't see Seraph or the black-haired elf. Just dragons in the air and on the ground, throwing up dirt. *Too late!* Curse his broken wing. Curse his weakness, curse Dokul and the tower and Elisandra and it all. Damn them all!

Seraph wasn't dying here.

The diamond hunkered to his left. She hadn't attacked and she hadn't gone after the elf. Lysander swung his glare on her and drilled it deep. He couldn't chase the dragons, but *she* could. She was agile and quick, faster than any other here.

Power beat at his mind, buzzing through his being, rolling in hot, heavy waves. Raw rage and lust and a desperate need to *control*, to *stop*, to *take*.

The rabid, untethered part of him clicked.

The diamond was his.

So easy, now he had her locked in his thrall.

The creature's mind was a simple thing. He'd been right. She wanted him, but he had other plans for her. *Go. Stop them.*

She flashed through the grass and as Lysander hobbled behind, the submissive diamond became his vicious blade. She tore at her dragonkin, clawing and ripping with her teeth, carving a path of carnage through the horde. And all the while, the steady, thrumming power filled Lysander's being with the solid, unforgiving beat of *control*. Real control.

His heart raced.

He wanted more.

He wanted all of them under him.

Rhadgar swung about mid-flight, dove straight for the diamond, extended his feet, and sank his claws into her back, ripping her from her foray. In one sudden, vicious bite, he punctured her skull behind her crown and dropped her limp body. The string of *control* snapped.

Lysander bellowed.

Rhadgar turned his devastating gaze on him.

The power in the king's eyes tried to crawl inside Lysander's skull like a thousand insects beneath his skin. The mental touch crept and slid and slithered, writhing through Lysander's thoughts. But the link worked both ways and Lysander could feel Rhadgar's mind too. The king was cold and hard, but brittle. He could be broken.

Rhadgar hovered above his brood, hesitating for the briefest of moments, and then he dove down and forward, his eyes filled with murderous intent. There was the dragon Lysander had known existed inside. There was the jeweled madness, the true killer behind all the reasoning and words.

And this would be Lysander's end.

He almost welcomed it but wished Eroan were here to understand how Lysander had fought to save Seraph.

If he died here, he'd take Rhadgar with him. Emerald against emerald.

A sleek dragon as black as the longest night blotted out the light.

The beast slammed into Rhadgar's side, using its great, horned head as a ram. Rhadgar released a surprised yowl just as the black dragon snatched the tumbling emerald in its claws.

Lysander knew those matte black scales, those golden eyes, and that amethyst flame boiling low in the dragon's throat. There was no other dragon like him.

Akiem.

The pair hit the ground and rolled in a mass of claws and wings just a few hundred meters ahead, flattening the meadow and throwing up clouds of dirt. Wet sounds of muscle and flesh tearing drowned out dragoncalls.

The dust settled.

Akiem threw his head back and roared. Blood dripped from his teeth and down his neck.

Rhadgar, the only emerald Lysander had ever met, lay gutted beneath Akiem's claws.

"Lysander..."

He blinked. The voice hit him like a slap in the face. Panting, he peered at the impossible sight of Eroan looking up at him.

How?

His elf smiled and the oddest sound of relief purred from Lysander. Fucking hells, his elf was here. He wasn't alone. He didn't have to fight them all. But there were more dragons. They'd take Eroan. A growl swallowed the purr.

"Seraph and Trey?" Eroan asked, voice raised.

Lysander jerked his head north to where the dragons squawked and bickered, so focused on finding the elves they were still unaware their king was dead. But that wouldn't last.

Get out of here! He growled a warning and turned his head south, suggesting Eroan flee that way. *Go! Run!*

Eroan ran, but in the opposite direction—*toward* the angry horde of mindless dragons. Of course he did.

Lysander hobbled forward, snapping at his rear leg when it wouldn't move like it should. *Too slow.* Everything was too slow. Why did his body not work the way it should? Damn it all!

He could shift, but if he did that, he'd lose sight of Eroan in the meadow.

His gaze slid to Akiem. His brother guarded his kill, his snout buried in Rhadgar's belly, devouring slippery entrails. As though sensing Lysander's gaze, Akiem raised his head and snarled. A cold, empty nothingness burned in Akiem's golden eyes.

The thought of trying to control his brother quickly slid from Lysander's mind. Now was not the time to go there. He yipped instead, rousing Akiem from the killing lust and drawing his eye to the scattered dragon horde beginning to realize their king was not among them.

Lysander readied himself for the attack. They would see Rhadgar had fallen and they'd retaliate. It's what any amethyst would do.

But as some of Rhadgar's flight plodded closer and others descended nearby, they sniffed death in the air, recognized it as belonging to their king, and drifted away, dissipating in all directions, until there was nothing left but Akiem and Lysander and the steaming remains of two dead dragons in a flattened meadow.

Akiem huffed and snorted, shaking glittering green dragonscale from his nose.

Lysander eyed his brother carefully, wondering if those bloodied green scales were a sign of things to come.



THEY TRAIPSED—SHIFTED to man—along the valley floor in the dark, following the scent of elf. Akiem loomed heavy and foreboding in Lysander's shadow. Occasionally, a dragon would bark, but it was distant. In this uninterrupted land of rolling hill, sound traveled for miles. The dragons had fled. The only threat now was Akiem.

Considering how they'd left things, with Akiem fighting off the Bronze chief and apparently Carline too, Lysander hadn't yet found the words to convey what he thought of his brother's arrival. Akiem didn't seem inclined to speak. Perhaps that was for the best. But there would be questions, from both sides. Before all that, Lysander needed to find Eroan. He needed to know he was safe, and Seraph too.

Crackling wood and woodsmoke gave the elves camp away, and in the shifting firelight, Eroan stood like some surprise gift, all wrapped up in traveling leathers, his hair bound in a long, loose plait down his back, the green earring shining with firelight. Lysander stopped so suddenly that Akiem plowed into him, alerting the elves to their presence.

Eroan's night-sensitive eyes zeroed in through the dark.

Lysander didn't want to step closer in case he broke the spell. Maybe Eroan wasn't real, maybe he'd puff away like smoke. Maybe Lysander had dreamed him up.

Akiem shoved by and stumbled into the camp where he dropped to his knees like a bag of rocks and bowed his head, succumbing to shivers Lysander hadn't noticed until now.

The elves—Eroan, Seraph, and the other one whose name escaped Lysander—regarded Akiem warily. None moved to comfort him.

Eroan's gaze shifted to Lysander. Flickering heat burned in his blue eyes, making Lysander's heart stutter. Would it be too much to go over there and hold him in front of his elven companions, to fucking claim him and never let him go?

Weeks, months, so much had happened, and there was Eroan. Unchanged. Perfect.

"Is he going to stand out there all night?" the nameless elf asked.

Getting a grip of his runaway emotions, Lysander entered the glow of the firelight, clearing his throat. "I—"

Seraph leaped at him, hitting him dead center in the chest. The breath *oomphed* from his lungs. Little arms squeezed his ribs. Stunned, he let it happen, only thinking again after Eroan's half-smile caught his eye.

"Hello to you too," Lysander croaked.

Seraph stepped back, adjusting her clothes and smoothing her hair, suddenly aware she had everyone's attention, besides Akiem, still hunched over and quiet. "Oh by Alumn's grace! I have never run so fast in my life! Did you see? Trey and me..." she whistled. "We rocked that fight. Dragons are sloooooow."

"You ran—" Lysander started.

"—could have died," Eroan finished.

She waved off their concerns and plonked herself back beside the chuckling Trey. "We had them right where we wanted them." She offered her fist to Trey who bumped his knuckles against hers.

As she prattled on, going over their grand escape in fine detail, Lysander caught Eroan's eye again, or maybe Eroan hadn't stopped watching him. He wasn't sure. The elf's smile lingered like an unspoken invite. Lysander moved around the fire and settled at Eroan's side, close enough to feel the thrumming sense of rightness between them, but distant

enough it wouldn't compromise Eroan's position here, whatever that might be.

"You came," Lysander whispered under his breath. He wanted to say more, to spill all the mad words clamoring in his head.

Eroan waited so long to reply, his gaze lost in the fire, Lysander thought he had nothing to say, and then finally, he said, "I made you a promise."

So simple. The promise: Eroan Ilanea would never give up on Lysander. It was a struggle, but Lysander managed to wrangle his racing heart under control and keep the broad grin from sprouting across his face. Eroan had come for him and everything was going to be okay because of it.

He wondered if this strange elation was what love felt like?

"Are you well?" Eroan asked, his voice level, calm, but tight with a concern Lysander would never get used to hearing. "Your leg was wounded?"

"Battered. Tired. But I'll live." His gaze fell unwittingly to Akiem. He'd killed Rhadgar. Lysander was under no illusion: Akiem had killed Rhadgar because he was emerald.

Eroan tilted his head. "Your brother escaped Dokul."

Lysander nodded once. Nothing else needed to be said but the relief at seeing Akiem quickly turned to his usual mix of distrust and wariness. Had he escaped or had Dokul freed him?

"He's holding up well," Eroan added. The words were lost a little beneath Trey's sudden laugh and Seraph's loud rebuff about something they jokingly disagreed on. "Much to my surprise."

Was Eroan Ilanea warming to Akiem? Lysander kept his smile but added a querying frown.

"I almost killed him three times on the journey up here," Eroan said, reading Lysander's expression. "Once, because he moves as heavily as a cow through the brush."

Akiem grunted and lifted his head. Some of the mad hollowness Lysander had seen in the meadows still lingered, but most of it had thawed into Akiem's resting expression. Lysander didn't trust it, but he also knew what Dokul could do to a mind. This Akiem—on his knees and trembling—wasn't capable of scheming, but he would be, the second the opportunity presented itself.

Out of them all, Akiem was the most dangerous. "Don't trust him," Lysander said.

Akiem snorted at that too and then took himself to a nearby flat piece of grass where he could sit and watch the fire, keeping himself removed but close enough to bask in the fire's warmth. Eroan gave Lysander a look as though to ask if he'd really just told Eroan, of all people, not to trust a dragon. A lock of hair fell over one of his eyes.

A chuckle found its way to Lysander's lips. Despite losing the emerald, and all the knowledge that went with him, he'd have lost it all again a hundred times to have Eroan beside him. And maybe, with the things he'd learned, maybe one day soon he'd be worthy of this stubborn elf who didn't know when to quit.

The camp had fallen quiet and Lysander blinked away from Eroan to find Trey and Seraph were openly staring.

Seraph nudged Trey in the arm. "Told you."

The tattooed elf, Trey, sighed. "All right, all right." He dug into his pocket and handed over something shiny.

Eroan folded his arms. "It's best not to ask."

"I bet Trey this shiny human ring thingy," Seraph waggled the ring thingy in the air, "that Eroan would come for Lysander." Seraph grinned. "I was so right."

"He came because Dokul has a flight of hundreds approaching this area," Akiem said, gruffly, "and Dokul may soon be among them." His dark eyes scanned the camp. "I suggest we rest well before that happens. Time is not on our side."

Lysander wanted to pull Akiem to his feet and demand all the answers out of him, but by the way his brother's eyelids drooped, he was in no condition to be interrogated. The morning, then. Lysander could wait a night.

Eroan stoked the fire, placing on more logs, while Trey and Seraph chatted. Lysander breathed deeply, taking the moment to enjoy the stillness. An honest moment. He was here, with friends, and right now, he felt almost like he belonged.

Approaching Eroan, he knelt beside him, fighting the need to reach out and touch him. "I need to speak with you. I learned some things about... me. Things you should know." He eyed Akiem but his brother appeared to be sleeping. Akiem likely knew the answers anyway, but Eroan should know everything first. "Not here," he added, unsure of how Seraph would react to learning what he could do.

Eroan dipped his chin in a brief nod and led Lysander out of the light, into the dark beyond the camp where boulders peppered the landscape. Low-lying brush hissed in the breeze.

They walked far enough that the firelight still lent a touch of orange to Eroan's near-white hair and warmed his lips and cheek, not that Lysander was paying attention to how that same light still burned in the elf's eyes, like he had his own fire inside, one Lysander could tease and stoke and make burn for him.

Eroan shrugged off the dragonblade and leaned back against a rock almost the size of him. Had his shirt laces been open moments before? Lysander couldn't recall, but now he couldn't seem to look away from that tantalizing glimpse of neat collarbone and kissable skin.

"Let's talk," Eroan prompted. A sly lilt lifted his voice.

Talking. Right. He'd had a good reason for wanting this private conversation but now they were alone, a whole lot of other reasons sprang to mind, most of them involving teasing Eroan's shirt strings open some more. "You are very distracting."

"Am I?"

Fuck it. Lysander stepped in, cupped Eroan's jaw and pressed all of himself closer, just enough to tease the provocative elf. By nights, he was even prettier in this soft, rippling light. Lysander brushed his thumb over the corner of Eroan's lips, wanting to taste that spot and so many others. His damned heart raced along. Heat pumped too fast through his veins. Eroan watched him with those curious, keen eyes, luring Lysander in. Like a lovestruck fool, Lysander would so easily drop to his knees and do anything this elf asked. So this was it, for now; a touch, a promise of more. If Eroan wanted more, he'd have to take it.

"Nye drugged—"

Eroan's finger sealed Lysander's lips. "I know. Don't talk of him."

The finger eased off but stayed resting gently on Lysander's mouth. It trailed lower, over his bottom lip, and then across his rough chin and up his jawline, eliciting a thin, sharp cascade of shivers through Lysander. He had no hope of hiding how Eroan strummed him alive. "Gods, elf." The words blurted heavier than he'd planned.

"I thought you'd left," Eroan said. "Even after everything, I thought you'd left."

Lysander grabbed both of Eroan's rough hands, capturing them, and now he did push in, plastering against the unyielding hardness that was Eroan Ilanea. "Never." Lysander rested his forehead against Eroan's, falling into the elf's saddened eyes. Oh to see the sadness there; it cut straight through Lysander's heart. "That night—the dancing and the fayre—I kept that night with me. I would have returned long before now. I was going to, but I learned things, things that could change everything. But every day, every night, I wanted to go to you." *To go home... to you.*

Eroan's lashes fluttered down. "It's gone. Cheen's elders... It's not the home I hoped it would be."

"You are my home," Lysander whispered before he could lose the moment.

Eroan's eyes closed. He sighed out. His cool, soft breath mingled with Lysander's. For the first time, he saw Eroan truly hurting. This wasn't like the physical torture Eroan had endured in the tower, this wasn't something Eroan could fight his way out of. His home, his people, they had cast him out. After everything he'd done for them, he'd been forsaken.

A growl burbled low in Lysander's throat. "I'll eat them all if you wish it. Just say the word."

Eroan's gorgeous mouth quirked. When he opened his eyes, they shone a little brighter. He pulled a hand free from Lysander's grip and pressed it to Lysander's cheek, callouses rough.

Lysander leaned into the touch, feeling the dragon in him unfurl and stretch, soaking up everything Eroan gave. He could stay here forever, stay lost in the quiet with Eroan pressed against him. Dragons be damned. He'd earned it, hadn't he?

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CHAPTER 14



Eroan

THE SHAME and anger Eroan had carried with him since leaving Cheen faded away beneath the solid warmth of Lysander pressed close. But he wasn't close enough. Eroan wanted to pull his dragon in and kiss him until he forgot about everything he should be, kiss him until the world became just them.

The three days in Cheen hadn't been enough. He wanted weeks, months, years, but that wasn't going to happen—not for them. So he'd take now, this moment, with Lysander looking at him, his green eyes full of want and compassion and understanding, and Eroan would keep it forever in his heart.

His dragon. His heart.

He couldn't keep losing him.

"Whatever we do next," he whispered, brushing the words softly against Lysander's mouth, "we do together."

Lysander's mouth skimmed Eroan's, his lips soft and warm and opening, inviting Eroan in. Eroan's heart was a pounding, heated thing, his body ablaze with need, but he held himself back. When he fell into the promised kiss, he'd fall hard. He'd never known a feeling like this. It consumed him, made him free, but it hurt too. The tales never revealed that about love, about how much it hurt.

He ran his fingers into Lysander's hair and Lysander tilted his head, rubbing against the touch. Alumn, he was too precious a thing, this dragon who had survived against the odds, the dragon who kept right on fighting. Who never gave up. Eroan wanted to take him away somewhere where the world was different, where it could be just the two of them day and night, and nothing would come between them.

With Lysander's head tilted into Eroan's hand, he left his neck exposed. Eroan drew him close and skimmed a kiss below his jaw, tasting salt and dragon. Pleasure trilled through his veins, his body hypersensitive to how Lysander's hip dug into his, how Lysander's thigh had pinned between his legs, trapping him against the rock. Lysander was careless in his rough beauty. Eroan needed more of him beneath his hands, in his mouth, pinched between his teeth.

Seraph's little laugh danced through the quiet.

The camp was too close.

Dragons likely lingered nearby.

They couldn't do this now. Here.

Eroan pulled Lysander's shirt free and ran his hands inside, over Lysander's hip and up the lean design of lower abdominal muscles, then swept his hands behind Lysander's back, pulling him in. Lysander's shuddering sigh heated Eroan's neck and a raw, demanding sense of need came over him. They'd barely kissed, barely touched, but Eroan had already lost his mind to pursuing every inch of Lysander's body.

Lysander's rough jaw scraped against Eroan's. "What I want to do with you, I cannot do here," Lysander breathed.

Eroan tilted his hips, grinding his arousal against Lysander's thigh, revealing exactly how much he wanted the same. Eroan caught Lysander's jaw and forced Lysander to look him in the eyes. "Can you be quiet, dragon?"

Lysander's mouth twitched. He pulled free of Eroan's grip and snapped his teeth together near his finger. "Fuck, no." Sizzling lust made his eyes shimmer. "And I doubt you want Seraph seeing you pinned against a rock and fucked out of your mind?"

He made a good argument. Reluctantly, Eroan let his hands fall away. "Tell me what happened to you here."

As Lysander slowly moved off, a chill swept in, and Eroan ached to hold him all over again. This pull between them was a force all its own, one

Eroan had no hope of fighting. Mostly because he had no wish to fight it at all.

Straightening against the rock, he adjusted his trousers, wincing as the unsatisfied erection snagged. Lysander saw and his twitching mouth settled on a hungry smile. Eroan knew exactly how that mouth felt around the most intimate parts of him. The memories pulsed heat through Eroan's need. He smothered what would have been a groan with a growl. "Continue looking at me like that and I won't care what Seraph sees."

Lysander blinked slowly, dark lashes falling over sly, green eyes. But with another step back and after he'd dragged a hand down his face, he drew in a breath, making his smile fade, replacing it with a more detached seriousness. "There was an emerald here. He killed Mirann. He had the answers that have been kept from me my entire life."

Lysander went on, recounting his time in the north and the alluring emerald he'd met. When he mentioned how the emerald appeared to be able to control his kin, Eroan stilled. Lysander continued, his deep, smooth voice intoxicating in its own way.

His eyes... Eroan considered, not in the least surprised. Hadn't he fallen into Lysander's gaze a thousand times? But to learn Lysander potentially had such enormous power? He was right, it did change things. It could change everything.

Lysander paced as he talked now, speaking of control and of how he'd sensed something in the past, but he'd always attributed it to the dragons' rage. When he'd killed Elisandra. When he'd coupled with Mirann. And other times, he mentioned, his gaze skirting Eroan. *Bad times.*

"Rhadgar and I, we were the same... He learned to live with what he could do, but he didn't utilize it. He wasn't thinking big enough. We can, Eroan. If I can make it work every time, the dragons—all dragons—would be under me."

His words raced after each other. The lust in his eyes had sharpened. Eroan had no doubt a gift such as being able to control all dragons could change the world, but what would it do to Lysander? Clearly, he wanted this, needed it, but a tiny bite of fear nipped at Eroan's thoughts. Lysander had always been different, he'd always been better, he didn't need to control the dragons to lead them, but he couldn't see that, not beneath a lifetime of abuse. He needed this to work.

“It worked on the diamond before Rhadgar killed her,” Lysander said. “If I can find another dragon...” His attention drifted back toward the flickering campfire, toward his brother.

The fear inside Eroan bit harder. “He is weak.” For the life of him, he had no idea why he was trying to protect Akiem. But having Lysander try to manipulate his own brother felt wrong.

“All the more reason to try it,” Lysander said, meaning it.

“Let him rest.” Eroan picked up the dragonblade. “We should all rest. Seraph will take first watch.” He headed back along the path, toward the light, feeling Lysander close behind him. Dragons used one another. That was how they were. Lysander had every right to want to use Akiem. His brother would do the same to him. Eroan knew this, but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“Dokul is coming.”

Eroan stopped.

Eroan could hear Lysander’s footfalls in the grass, and then the dragon was beside him, his eyes the brightest thing about him while the rest of him was shrouded in darkness. “He’s coming for me, and this time he has a flight of perhaps thousands. I’ll not be taken again, Eroan.”

“You won’t be.”

“Are you going to stop him?”

Something in those words cut and Eroan winced before he could think to hide it. Lysander saw. His brow pinched. Eroan wanted nothing more than to be able to stop Dokul, to kill him, but for all his skill as an assassin, getting to Dokul through a flight of a thousand dragons was impossible.

Lysander looked away. “I’ll kill myself before I let him have me again.”

The words cut again, deeper this time. Eroan reached for him, first by gripping his shoulder and then when that wasn’t enough, he pulled Lysander in and folded his arms around him—the prince Eroan had failed to keep safe. “You’re not alone. What we do next, we do together,” he whispered, voice trembling with the weight of the promise. “I won’t let it happen, do you understand? Do you hear me, Lysander? What he did to you, that’s never happening again. I will stop him. I will.” A promise to Lysander and a promise to himself. Dokul would die, and it would be beneath Eroan’s blade.



TREY TOED EROAN AWAKE, although truly he hadn't been sleeping, just drifting, resting his eyes. He nodded at the assassin and checked the camp in the soft morning light. Mist had crept in, but the sun had already begun to burn it off, sparkling through droplets in the grass, making them sparkle.

Lysander and Akiem were missing. "Where are they?" Eroan grabbed his sword and got to his feet. On the opposite side of the burned-down fire, Seraph stirred.

"I don't know," Trey said. "There's no sign of them."

Lysander hadn't gone far. He'd have said he was leaving. But he'd vanished before. "Go north, I'll go east. Seraph..." She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Lysander and Akiem are missing. Go south. If none of us find them, we know to head west. Meet back here when the sun has risen."

The dragons hadn't been taken. Not this time. But if they had left together, what did that mean?

He heard them first, the rumbling snarling and growling of dragons facing-off. Cresting a rocky knoll, he saw the fight starting up in a hollowed area below. Lysander circled Akiem. The black prince lay hunched on his belly, wings partially spread, head up and jaws open in a clearly defensive pose.

Lysander was trying to control Akiem. Perhaps it needed to be done, but Eroan couldn't shake the sense of wrongness. Whistling through his teeth, Seraph and Trey jogged to him moments later.

"What's he doing?" Trey asked.

"Lysander is finally putting Akiem in his place," Seraph huffed, crossing her arms.

"That's not it." A part of Eroan wanted to stop this, but if Lysander was right, the power he had should be explored.

Akiem panted hard. Some scales were missing along his back and neck. His wing membranes were tattered and split at their edges. Had he been like that since Dokul? *Alumn, why do I care?*

Eroan resigned himself to watching the brothers face-off, ignoring the odd hope that Lysander would fail.

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CHAPTER 15



Lysander

THIS HAD TO HAPPEN. He had to do this. He'd unleashed the ability to control on the diamond. He could do it again now after luring his brother away from camp *to talk*. He *had* to. Dokul was coming. Lysander needed to change, to be better, or else Dokul would destroy everything all over again. He'd meant what he'd said to Eroan. He'd rather die than have Dokul smother him again.

As dragon, he circled Akiem's prone form, trying to ignore how wrecked his brother looked. Akiem had been a constant presence, a proud, unyielding pillar against which Lysander measured himself. The favored prince, the queen's special one. Now he just looked pathetic, and it was fucking with Lysander's plans to pin him down and see if he could *control* him.

Lysander locked gazes with Akiem, but instead of fight, Akiem just bared his teeth and stayed hunched, reeking of fear. Lysander needed him to fight, he needed his blood up, or this wasn't going to work. Just staring wasn't enough. He had to feel it inside, the ferocious wildness, the most dragon part of him needed to lust and hunger.

Frustrated, Lysander growled low and menacing and all Akiem did was pant and wither. He smelled of sweat. He smelled of... metal.

Frustration snapped and became something sharp and deadly. He sank his teeth into Akiem's neck. Akiem's front feet scrambled in the dirt, trying to lever himself away, and Lysander clamped his jaws harder. *Hold*. Bite. Take. Fuck. Own. He needed Akiem beneath him. This had to happen. Or nothing changed.

"Lysander, stop."

Eroan.

Lysander eyed the elf's approach. Huffing through his nose, his mouth full of dragon, he considered—just for a moment—making the bite fatal. It wouldn't take a lot more force to crush Akiem's neck.

Eroan stopped his approach. "This is wrong, and you know it."

Wrong? What was wrong was the stench of Dokul marking Akiem. What was wrong, was that Lysander couldn't escape the Bronze chief, but Rhadgar had given him a way out, if he could just fucking make it work. This had to work.

Eroan palmed the dragonblade. "Release Akiem. We'll find another way."

Another way? Wasn't that what Lysander had been trying to do his entire life? Find another way to survive, find another way to live, and where had it gotten him? Gods, he just wanted it to end.

He plucked his teeth from Akiem's neck and bared them at Eroan instead. The elf didn't move, but behind him, the other two looked on.

Eroan narrowed his eyes. "Don't."

Don't what? Don't attack? Don't hurt Akiem? Don't become better, stronger, more powerful?

Akiem licked at his fresh wounds and Lysander burbled a disgusted rumble before peeling off and stalking down the narrow valley. He knew Eroan followed, so he kept right on walking, flattening a path through brambles and shrubs. Content he'd wandered far enough, he dropped, pulled his wings in and rested his chin on his forelegs. It didn't take long for the elf to walk all the way around and stand at the end of his snout, almost making Lysander cross his eyes to see him.

His elf looked angry.

Lysander huffed, mussing up Eroan's hair.

"Your brother is suffering as you suffered, let that be enough punishment for now."

Lysander turned his head away and blinked at a nearby dead tree, its branches stark against those of its neighbors.

Eroan was in front of him again, taking up all his attention. “If you push him, he’ll break, and there’s no knowing what he’ll do after that.”

Akiem wouldn’t break if Lysander could control him. Well, that clearly wasn’t going to happen. It seemed Eroan protected Akiem now too. Wasn’t one dragon enough? Wasn’t Lysander enough? Akiem always came out on top. He always won. He was always better. Always appreciated. Always admired. And now Eroan looked at Akiem differently too. Eroan was Lysander’s.

Lysander turned his head the other way and squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe the elf would go away.

“I’m not leaving. Shift and speak with me.”

He didn’t much feel like shifting back just yet. He opened his eyes, and there stood Eroan—stupid, stubborn Eroan. Lysander breathed out through his nose and rested his head on his forefeet again, fixing the elf in his gaze.

“All right.” Eroan sheathed the blade, came around the right side of Lysander’s nose, and perched himself on the ground, leaning against Lysander’s foot. Lysander could barely see him right below his eye, but he could feel him getting comfortable against his scales. He was just going to sit there, was he?

“I don’t pretend to understand your feelings for your brother,” Eroan said, sometime later, when the sun had risen and began baking Lysander’s scales. “I don’t really know why I’m protecting him either, but it feels like the right thing.”

Of course it did. Because Eroan was good. He did good things. Lysander wasn’t sure if he’d ever been good, but he wanted to be, for Eroan. For himself. For the future he dared dream they might one day have.

Lysander closed his eyes and waited as the sun beat down and his elf nestled next to him.

“Perhaps you cannot force this thing to happen. Perhaps you just need to believe it can. Isn’t that what the emerald told you?”

Rhadgar had said that, and Eroan was right. Like always. But what if he never believed and Dokul came?

If he had two working wings, that would help. If the Silver dragon in his dreams, the one who had saved him after the tower fell, told him where she was, that would help too. As it was, all he got was a coldness, a world of

ice, and a sense that for all his potential, he was going to die in that ice before any of it came to fruition.

"I believe in you," Eroan said.

Lysander sighed. Gods, he was not worthy of Eroan Ilanea.



"YOU ARE A SON OF A BREEDING BITCH," Akiem said. He looked as gray and sickly as the skinny, half-dead tree he stood next to. "I should have eaten you in the nest right after you hatched."

"You tried." A twinge of regret tried to gnaw at Lysander's steely resolve before he reminded himself Akiem had done worse to him in the past. Much worse.

The elves were clearing the camp, collecting their weapons and traveling sacks while Akiem loitered just outside the camp's fringes, watching them without making it obvious. Why was he here at all? Was he trying to infiltrate elves for some purpose?

"Intriguing, aren't they," Lysander muttered.

Akiem grunted.

Did he still view them as food? Lysander wondered. Or were they something else now that Eroan had taken Akiem under his metaphorical wing?

"Why are you here?" Lysander asked, still keeping his voice low. "And don't tell me some shit about coming here for me. If Elisandra were still alive you'd be here for her. Dokul doesn't plot like this. So it's all you."

Akiem glanced over, hearing the sharpening edge to Lysander's voice. "Like I told your elf, I had nowhere else to go."

That was horseshit. Lysander squared up to him, making Akiem lift his chin just that little bit higher. The bastard was taller, making Lysander lift his chin. "If you hurt Eroan or any elf, I will break your fucking neck, brother, and leave you to die alone in this shithole. Don't think I won't."

Akiem's top lip rippled. "After everything I did for you."

"You've never done a damn thing but stand by and watch."

Akiem's gaze clouded. "I never told you what really happened between Elisandra and Amalia. For the longest time, it didn't matter."

Lysander snorted, the sound more dragon than man. “Mother killed her when she would not submit. I know what happened. Bringing it up now just proves you’re an asshole.” He eased off, the posturing pointless. Akiem was who he was. Nothing changed.

The elves still busied themselves. They likely heard every word but pretended they didn’t.

“It’s your fault,” Akiem added.

He’d said the same before, in the tower fight before *accidentally* stabbing Lysander. “How do you figure that?”

“Elisandra told us you were to be traded off to Dokul’s brood long before it finally happened. Amalia said...” Akiem’s voice cracked, bleeding every second from the moment. “She told Mother that it made more sense for her to go because she was female and the amethyst line would continue if she coupled with Dokul. Amalia tried to save *you* from a fate beneath the bronze. That was her way. She knew you were... She knew you couldn’t stomach females.”

Lysander fell silent, his anger draining out of him. He hadn’t known the details, just that Amalia and Elisandra had fought; Amalia had been wounded and cast out of the tower: a death sentence.

“She died because she tried to save *your* useless hide. I hated you for that. After Amalia died, my whole life became all about Lysander Amethyst. Mother made it so I was to spy for her, watching you, waiting for your fucking *gift* to manifest. She didn’t give a shit about me, brother. It was always you.”

Lysander clenched his jaw. He hadn’t known, hadn’t even considered how Elisandra had been using Akiem or that his brother had been forced into a life of servitude. “Why did Elisandra let me live?”

“Curiosity. And fear. While you were under her, the others all feared what you could do. You made Amethyst strong just by being emerald. I hated you for it.”

It sounded true. Akiem rarely lied, he didn’t need to. “You should have told me. About Amalia. About all of it.”

Akiem’s laugh sounded as broken as the dragon inside the man. “After you just tried to mindfuck me in the fields, I’m glad I didn’t. It took Dokul...” His voice caught. He swore under his breath and cleared the knot in his throat. “What he did to me... to you. Gods, I never wanted that for you. I regret the things I’ve done to you. I’m... sorry.”

Lysander blinked, hardly believing what he'd just heard. Akiem didn't apologize. Ever.

Lysander grabbed his brother's shoulder and spilled a little healing warmth through his fingers. He needed it. Akiem met his gaze and nodded. Nothing needed to be said aloud; the silence held it all. Brothers. Enemies. Trapped together.

Then Akiem nodded at Eroan. "He thinks you're something impossible—a good dragon." Akiem's dark eyes shifted to Lysander. "I know you're not."

Akiem hadn't meant it as a dig. It was fact. "This world doesn't need a good dragon, it needs a powerful one."

Seraph tossed her carrying bag onto her shoulder. "Where next?" she asked Eroan, and then looked at Lysander. "Do we all go home together?"

Home. Lysander met Eroan's gaze. The bronze were coming for Lysander, all of them by the sounds of it, and as much as he wanted to be with Eroan, he also knew Dokul would not stop hunting him. Eroan's new home would be at risk if Lysander were there.

"It's up to you," Eroan said, as though reading his thoughts. "You're free to choose your own path."

He so wanted to go to Eroan's new home but not as he was. Change had to happen, or they'd never be safe. If he could find Carline, or even the Silver from his dream, if he could learn to tame his power, and dragons along with it, then there would be time to live in peace, but not yet. "North," he said. "I need to go north. I can't explain it... I have dreams..." Where to begin? The Silver, Alumn, the ice. His need to find the truth in himself. It was all north. He could feel it.

Eroan merely nodded. "Then north it is. Trey, Seraph, you are free to return to the settlement if you wish."

Seraph tapped her chin, pretending to think on it. "Order assassins don't abandon their prides."

"What she said," Trey drawled, standing firm beside her.

"You don't have to do this." Lysander couldn't stand another elven death on his conscience. "I can go north alone. I'm not even sure what I'm searching for—"

Seraph whirled away and stomped through the brush. "North is this way. Let's go then. We're wasting good daylight."

Lysander caught Akiem's small smile. It seemed almost genuine and nothing like his brother's shallow predatory grins. "A flight of elves," Akiem said, "and a pride of dragons. Whatever next?"

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CHAPTER 16



N_{ye}

THE FOREST WAS the kind of quiet that made Nye's skin itch. He dared not light a fire. Not this night, with its many eyes. He could feel gazes on him, like the skitter of spider legs. He'd camped here a few nights now, and perhaps that was his mistake. He should have kept moving.

Nights like this were why Order assassins traveled in pairs.

He straightened, checked the dragontooth dagger at his hip, and slunk into the dark. The air was wet, rich and earthy, and the ground soft underfoot. He needed to stay clear of the marsh, where the black waters were hungry, but that should be easy enough so long as he didn't get turned around in the trees.

A twig snapped to his right.

He stilled, listening, trying to filter out the sound of his heart. It wouldn't be dragon. None were this quiet. A wolf then.

Damn Eroan for this. *"I don't love you. I have never loved you. We were friends. Now we are nothing."* The words tried to steal his breath and blind him. He breathed out, riding the feeling. Nye had been right. Eroan just couldn't see it. He would though. One day soon, he would. The dragon prince would turn on them all and Eroan would beg Nye to return. Nye would wait. He'd waited all his life for Eroan to see him. This was just another step along that path.

A growl, low and muffled from somewhere behind him. Not close. He still had time to take to the tree canopy, if he could just find a branch low enough. Carefully, he stalked forward, easing silently through the brush and over ankle-breaking roots. He wouldn't run. That would see it end sooner.

The tree ahead had a branch dipping from its main trunk, just low enough to reach and climb to safety.

He'd almost made it when the growl sounded again, this time raising the fine hairs on the back of his neck. Ahead, the wolf's eyes glowed. The beast was big but lean and wiry. *Hungry.*

A growl from behind him joined the first in front.

Trapped.

He had no choice now.

Nye bolted left, thrashing through bushes. He dropped down into a natural gulley, searching for a low branch or a river, something to deter the wolves.

The wolves raced after him, panting hard, claws scratching on wood and stone.

The marsh lay ahead, full of spikey reeds and oil-black water. They wouldn't chase him in there. He'd keep to the edges, go no deeper than his thighs and wait them out. It would be enough.

Nye hit the dank, heavy water hard and waded through, clawing at the soup-like texture, trying not to think of how it reminded him of estuary mud just like this and of how he'd found Curan, half-buried, his guts in his arms.

He'd survive this. He had to. It wasn't over and this wasn't how he died, not here. There was too much work left to be done. Eroan would come around. Eroan needed him.

Sticky water clung to his knees, holding him like hands might, trying to pull him deeper. He looked back. Three wolves stalked the edges of the marsh. They fanned out, plodding along its banks, sniffing at the surface.

Nye waited, dagger in hand. Cold soaked through his clothes, leaching all his warmth away, rattling his teeth.

The wolves circled a few times and then one of them, the alpha, sniffed at the air and slunk off. The remaining pair trotted after it soon after.

Nye lowered the dagger.

He should have lit a fire.

The bog waters had a firm grip on his legs. He dug around his knees, opening up some breathing space to break the suction and tried to pry

himself free. The mud pulled, but he pulled harder.

A deep, rumbling laughter whipped Nye's head up.

"What have we here?"

The man was huge, rounded out with muscle, and he wasn't alone. Four of them, all strangely similar in bulk and appearance, with smooth, hairless heads. Strings of metal lay over their shoulders and down their chests, like the metal he'd seen on Mirann. Dragonsight lent their eyes a sparkling shimmer.

Bronze.

The four of them spread out, encircling him.

"An elf all wrapped up and delivered," the one who had first spoken continued. A metal ring winked at his nipple.

Nye tasted metal on his tongue. He gripped his dagger tighter. "Stay back."

The bronze laughed. "Or what, little elf? Are you going to stick me with that tiny knife? I use knives like that to scratch my ass."

Nye only half listened. He watched the others. They hadn't yet ventured into the marsh, but they would. Their weight would work against them, might even deter them for a while, but they would get to him. He couldn't run, the marsh waters saw to that. He'd have to fight. Just one of them was easily twice his weight, maybe three times. Eroan had faced bronze like this. He'd fought them off. It could be done.

"I'll kill you," Nye said, teeth chattering from the cold and fear. They'd smell it on him, he realized, smell how he feared them.

They smiled back.

The big bronze crouched, draping his arms over his knees. "Come on then. Try and escape."

Nye kept an eye on each of them in turn and bent down to dig out the rest of his leg, then the other. The bronze watched, never losing their smiles. He'd have to move fast and get a lethal strike in first. A cut to the beast's thick neck would do it. Once the big one fell, the others might back off. It was the best Nye could hope for.

With his legs free, he waded forward.

"That's a good elf, come to Kash now," the brute, Kash, beckoned. "There. Just a little farther." A string of drool slipped down the side of the male's chin. He wiped it off and continued to leer, his hunger a rabid thing.

Nye reached out a hand. "Help me, won't you?"

The bronze's eyes widened. He knelt and reached forward. Nye took his hand. His skin crawled at the hot, gritty touch. The bronze clamped his other hand on Nye's upper arm and heaved Nye into his arms.

Nye's knee touched the bank. He got a foot under him, secured it so he wouldn't trip, and thrust the dagger up, deep into the dragonkin's chin. It wasn't a throat cut, he hadn't been able to get the right angle, but it was enough. The dragon roared, tearing backward, blood spraying, reflexively shoving Nye away.

Nye ran. He didn't know in what direction or how he was going to go to escape them, he just ran. He was faster, he had to be faster.

A dead weight hit him hard in the side, sending him sprawling in the dirt. His back hit something hard. Nye barked a cry and gasped, trying to refill his winded lungs. He rolled forward, fingers digging into moss. The big dragon grabbed Nye's shoulder and twisted, flipping him onto his back. He wrestled Nye's hands to the ground, pinning him beneath rock-like thighs. Blood poured from his chin, the wound a gaping second mouth. Nye bucked and twisted. The dragon's hands drove him into the ground. A fat, wet tongue slid up Nye's cheek. Dragon blood dripped over Nye's face, leaking from the hole in the male's skin.

Alumn, no. This couldn't be real. "Don't!"

"Such sweet cries."

The dragon's grip on Nye's left hand vanished. Nye thrashed, sinking his nails into the male's arm, desperately trying to lever him off.

"Hold him!" Kash ordered.

Heavy hands pinned Nye's flailing arm down. He couldn't move, couldn't think. Every breath burned. His focus misted. His body weakening.

The dragon's eyes shimmered with lust. He fumbled his trouser fly.

"Alumn, no," Nye whispered. This couldn't be happening. Not to him. Not now.

The bronze pulled his swollen shaft free, stroking over the disgusting piece of dragonmeat, and clawed at Nye's belt.

"Stop." Nye twisted his hips. With the weight of dragon on his legs and his arms pinned, he couldn't do anything more. These monsters were too big, too strong. "Don't!"

The brute was beyond hearing. Blood and spittle bubbled between his bared teeth. Madness crackled in his eyes now.

Fury scorched through Nye only for it to be ripped away when the male managed to yank Nye's trousers over his hips.

This wasn't happening, it couldn't. There had to be a way out, a way to stop it. He'd rather die than have that thing inside him. "Lysander!" Nye blurted. The dragon stilled. "I'll tell you where he is."

"And how would a thing like you know where to find that amethyst bitch?" Kash grunted and levered Nye's thighs apart, grinning at the naked prize of Nye's limp and exposed cock. "You'll have to do better than that, elf."

Nye squeezed his eyes shut. Rough fingers rode over his penis and slid downward, crushing his balls before moving on, finding the clenched hole. His breath labored. His heart thudded hot in his ears.

"Mirann..." Nye gasped. The hand stopped, fingers pressed against his hole but not yet penetrating. "Mirann," Nye gasped again, opening his eyes. "Dokul's daughter."

"What of her?" Kash straightened, his terrible weight lifting off a little.

It was working. The others still had Nye's arms pinned but Kash was backing off.

"I know where she is. I won't tell you anything if you... if you hurt me."

Kash looked to his companion on Nye's right. "He'll sing like a fucking bird," the other bronze grunted. "Just fuck him already. I want my go."

Kash worked his jaw and spat blood to the side. "Maybe Dokul would want this one."

"Dokul can have him. After we're done."

Kash winced. "Ah, shit." This one did not want to cross Dokul.

Nye locked the dragon in his glare. "There are eggs. Precious eggs? I know where those are too." Nye would escape them before they discovered both Mirann and her eggs were dead. This Kash just needed to take the bait.

"Fuck." Kash clambered to his feet. "He knows too much. Dokul will want him."

A hand locked around Nye's throat, cutting off his air. A vicious face filled his vision. Not Kash's. This was one of the other three. "Where's Mirann?"

Nye writhed, his head and chest pounding. He kicked out, scrabbled, twisted, but the thumping heaviness pulled the fight right out of him. The hand vanished. Air rushed in.

“Tell me, bitch!” A slap scorched across Nye’s face, almost knocking his senses right out of him.

Blood spilled into his mouth, bitter and warm. Gathering the blood on his tongue, he spat into the bronze’s face. The retaliating punch saw the world turn black.



BLOOD HAD DRIED on Nye’s lips. He’d have licked it off, but his tongue was parched, the skin split, his mouth full of dirt. He lay on his side. Dry leaves crinkled against his cheek. This had to be some kind of nightmare. It felt like one. His thoughts swam, his body numb. Pain had dulled to an all-over throbbing ache. And when his blurred focus cleared, there were dragons... everywhere. Just seeing them—barely clothed, bronze skin and broad muscles shimmering in the firelight—made his stomach clench. His back and chest throbbed, his throat too.

Why had Alumn forsaken him? Perhaps this was a trial, like Eroan’s. A test to see if he could survive.

A thick hand grabbed the back of his neck and yanked. “He’s here.” A gruff voice grated across his ear. He? For a moment Nye’s thoughts scrabbled to catch the meaning, but there could be only one He among the bronze. Nye couldn’t fight, not anymore. Standing, walking, those things he tried to do as his vision spun and the world tipped. The bronze held him up, part dragging, part shoving him through the mass of dragons. Their golden eyes shined. They smelled like blood, or maybe the blood was on him?

Eroan had survived this. Nye would too. He’d survive and escape and go back to Cheen, where he belonged. Where he was safe.

The dragon dumped Nye on a tree stump. Nye wavered, head down, trying to collect the broken pieces of his thoughts and make sense of them. Dragons nearby talked and laughed and wrestled, but the one in front of him now, that one stayed silent.

Nye slowly lifted his head.

A bare-chested, smooth-headed, monster of a man filled Nye’s vision. Light from the campfire lapped over his golden skin, making him glow as though fire writhed beneath his skin too.

Madness glittered in his eyes. Hunger too.

“Elves,” he said simply. His voice was deep, like thunder from a threatening storm.

He moved closer, towering over Nye.

Nye’s heart raced. He pulled at the ropes binding his wrists behind his back.

The dragon’s huge, rough hand caught him by the jaw and forced him to stare up. There was more in this dragon’s eyes than Nye had seen in the others. Color shimmered deep and far, as though this one was made of something far older than he appeared. He had a power the others did not.

This was Dokul, Nye realized. The ancient bronze.

Dokul pulled him off the stump. Nye’s feet dangled above the ground. Dokul’s mouth twitched. He leaned close and breathed in through his nose.

With a grunt, he dropped Nye back onto the stump, his assessment complete. “You’re a skinny one. I’m surprised you survived long enough for them to bring you here.” He turned away. Golden light slid down his broad, slick back. “Do you know who I am, elf?”

Nye rolled his tongue around his mouth, collecting as much moisture as he could. He tasted dragon and salt and the horror of what had almost happened to him by the marsh. “Yes,” he rasped, his voice broken from being throttled.

Dokul merely lifted an eyebrow. “My flight lost my newest prince and gave me an elf. I should have them all flayed.”

Nye had planned to escape before now, but here he was, bound and truly caught, just like Eroan had been. Eroan had survived. Nye had to cling to that hope. Everything Eroan could do, so could Nye. It had always been that way between them. Yes, this was a trial, sent to him by Alumn. He would not fail.

“They told me you have knowledge of my daughter, which is why you’re not fucked into a puddle. What do you have to tell me, elf?”

Nye tried to swallow, but his parched throat had swollen and clogged. “A deal...” he croaked, “I’ll make you a deal.”

Dokul’s deep, rolling laughter reverberated around their camp. Other dragons joined in, clearly listening. So many. “You are very amusing.”

“I will tell you all that I know,” he raised his voice. “But...” Nye glanced at the crowd. “They can’t touch me. Keep them all off me.”

Dokul threw his head back and chortled, setting them all off. “Making demands now! I do find elves so very entertaining.” Dokul listened to his

laughing flight until the sounds faded. “I should have fought harder to retrieve the blonde one. He had a fire about him you lack. You’ll squeal. I can tell that about you. Elisandra’s little pet was worth a hundred of you.”

“I’ll tell you everything! Lysander, Akiem, Mirann... all of it. But your dragons don’t touch me. Ever.”

The bronze’s laughter had gone from his lips, but it still sparkled in his eyes. “All right, little elf. Let’s start with something useful and go from there. Where is Mirann?”

“Dead.”

Dokul’s smile vanished behind a snarl. “How do you know this?”

“I saw her remains. The eggs too. They’re all dead.”

The beast’s chest expanded as he breathed in through his nose, the sound of it too much like the intake of breath before a dragon unleashing its flame. “It was Lysander.”

“No...” Dokul shook his head and pointed at Nye. “You see, that’s where you’re wrong. He’s not capable.” But there was doubt in the big dragon’s eyes.

Nye clutched a hold of that doubt. “He beat her. I heard about it. With a whip. No?”

The male’s top lip quivered. Mention of the whip had made him believe.

“He’s insane,” Nye went on. “He’s vicious. I tried to tell them all, but none would listen. But you know, don’t you. You know what he’s capable of.” A twitch on the male’s ugly face confirmed it. This dragon knew exactly what Lysander was capable of. Nye almost laughed with relief. Someone else saw the prince as he truly was. “He’s different. He does things no normal dragon would do. And you know this. You know how dangerous he is.”

Dokul came forward and crouched in front of Nye, studying him anew. “Go on, little elf. Spill your words. Tell me all you know of Lysander Amethyst.”

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CHAPTER 17



Eroan

“I SAW you sleeping next to Lysander in the meadow,” Seraph grinned, plodding along the path beside him. Lysander and Akiem had trekked ahead. Trey hung back, watching for threats.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Eroan denied. “We were talking.”

“He’s so big as dragon,” she threw her arms wide, “and you’re so small.” She made a tiny gap between her fingers. “It was *adorable*.”

“Adorable?” Eroan shot her a look as sharp as his dragonblade but her grin widened and his glare turned soft. “All right, so I dozed a little.” A treacherous smile tried to lift his lips. “It was warm in the meadow.”

“You mean *he’s* warm? He feels like the sun, doesn’t he?” She laughed a bright little laugh and elbowed him in the arm. “You’re so scowly. You got your dragon back, didn’t you?”

He did, and he was happy, happier than he’d been in... forever. But it was a fragile thing, like the butterflies flitting about them now. He’d learned not to trust happiness. It didn’t last.

“When do we kill Akiem?” Seraph suddenly asked.

Eroan lifted his gaze ahead. The dragons likely hadn’t heard, but Seraph needed to keep her voice down.

“Don’t tell me you’re going soft on him?” The steel in her eyes wasn’t new. She had carried it since the humans had brought her out to him from

beneath the bronze warren, but it had grown colder as of late.

“No. I’m not *going soft*. I’ll kill him, when it’s time, but he’s proven useful. If he hadn’t cut down that emerald, Lysander would likely be dead.”

“Do you think that’s the only reason he killed the emerald?”

The way she asked made it clear she believed Akiem had his own reasons for attacking the emerald. Eroan silently agreed. Akiem wasn’t known for saving his brother. The dragon wanted the emerald dead and took the first opportunity to see it happen.

“As the queen’s eldest spawn. I imagine Akiem has killed many emeralds over the years.”

“And yet he left Lysander alive this long?”

“Not out of love. The black prince isn’t capable of it. He tried to kill Lysander and he’ll try again, when he’s stronger.”

“We’ll kill Akiem before then, right?”

Eroan nodded.

“Good. I owe Xena his blood on my blade.” She paced ahead.

Eroan raised an eyebrow at her back. She’d grown since she’d left the new settlement. Just a little, but enough for muscle to build where there hadn’t been any before. She was losing the long, lanky look of an elfling and filling into the body of a fierce Order assassin.

She’d have likely died before now if Lysander hadn’t killed the queen. Lysander’s actions had changed the fate of all future elves. Eroan would tell him so. He’d hear, but he wouldn’t listen. Lysander wasn’t used to hearing the good about himself.

It had only been less than a day since finding Lysander again, but Eroan sensed something different in him—a fierceness that had always been there, but now the fierceness paced its cage, wanting out. Lysander wanted power, and he’d get it. Eroan prayed to Alumn it changed Lysander for the better, not worse.

“Eroan...” Trey jogged up to greet him. “We should catch up with the dragons. I fear we’re being tracked.”

“By?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen anything, but I feel it, like I used to as a messenger. Wolves, maybe. We should stay together.”

Eroan nodded, offering Trey a thankful smile. He’d wondered if the male resented him for exiling Nye, but he didn’t appear to, at least not while

working. Professional to a fault, exactly as an Assassin of the Order elf should be.

They jogged ahead, catching up with Seraph first and then the two dragons, both walking through the brush as men, lost in their silences.

“We need to get to higher ground,” Eroan told them. “Get the lay of the land and find somewhere to rest for the night.”

He also told them of Trey’s concerns, leading to both dragons sniffing the air. “I don’t smell wolf,” Lysander replied. “Just the sea and elf.”

“Regardless, let’s find shelter.”

They trekked some more, climbing a hill through tightly packed scrub. Eroan took the lead and used the blade to cut them a path until they stumbled across a sprawling abandoned structure, mostly overgrown, but with a few walls left exposed, providing shelter.

“I’ll take watch,” Akiem offered.

“No,” Eroan said. “Trey, get to that point,” Eroan gestured at the rocky peak above the valley. “And see if there’s anything rounding on us before we lose the light.”

Trey nodded and slipped into the bushes, vanishing a second later.

“I could shift and—” Akiem went on.

Eroan held the dragon’s gaze. “You’re staying with me.”

They cleared the ground, making a small camp inside the building’s three remaining walls, but agreed on no fire until they were sure whatever had been tracking them had moved on. A fire might keep wolves away but it’d lure dragons closer. Trey returned long after the sun had set, head shaking. “Whatever I thought I sensed, it’s gone. There are several excellent observation points. I’ll show Seraph and we’ll take first watch. Why don’t you all get some rest?”

Seraph took up her blade and went after Trey, leaving Eroan with Lysander and Akiem. With no fire, the only light came from the half-moon’s glow filtering through dense scrub. Summer air, still and warm, hung over them like a quilt.

Lysander was the first to sit, finding a spot against the back wall, tucked in among grass tufts and mossy earth. Akiem stretched all of himself out beneath the opposite wall, interlocking his fingers behind his head. His breaths soon slowed, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Lysander huffed at his brother. “He’ll sleep anywhere at any time.”

His dark skin absorbed the moon's milky light. But the same light made his eyes sparkle. He patted the ground beside him. "Sit beside me awhile?"

As much as Eroan would have liked to take up that spot beside him, his sense that something was out there kept him standing. "I'd have preferred food and a fire. We're exposed here, despite the walls." Eroan gritted his teeth. "I don't like it."

"It'll be fine. Unless it's not, in which case we'll deal with it." Lysander shrugged and rested his head back against the stone wall, peeking at Eroan through dark eyelashes. "We have three Order elves protecting two dragon princes. I'm sure we'll survive another night." He patted the spot beside him again.

Eroan recalled the meadow and how he'd lain, dozing against Lysander's dragon form. Seraph was right, he felt like the sun, like the warmth all elves needed to survive, and Eroan couldn't get enough of it. He settled beside Lysander, folding his legs crossed and lifting his head to observe stars and their silent sparkle. "Perhaps Alumn watches us."

"Alumn, huh."

Lysander's tone had Eroan turning to scrutinize his face. "Something on your mind?"

Lysander leaned forward, and drawing a knee up, draped his arm over it, appearing relaxed, but there was a tension to the movement too. "I think I died beneath Akiem's blade." He rubbed at the point low on his waist where Akiem's blade had sunk in and thrust upward, toward his heart. "But there was someone there in the cold. She told me to return. She healed me."

Eroan considered where this might be going. "Who?"

"She said her name was Alumn."

"She did?" Dreams maybe. Eroan had been close to death and his mind had played tricks on him, made him see and believe things that weren't real. "You dream a lot of this?"

Lysander nodded. "And there's something else."

Eroan waited. Whatever it was, Lysander clearly wasn't sure about voicing it.

"In my dreams, she's dragon. Silver, to be precise."

The Silver dragon was somehow in Lysander's head, she'd somehow brought him back from the dead and she was called Alumn? A smile had made a home on Eroan's lips before he thought to hide it.

Lysander plucked at a tuft of grass and tossed it back to the ground. "You don't believe me."

"I believe you almost died and I believe you saw some things you can't explain. It's very common near death to experience hallucinations."

"For elves, maybe. Not for dragons. We are not big dreamers."

"Alumn is not dragon. She is the light all elves follow. Such a thing is... she's not dragon." It was simple really. No elf would follow a dragon, besides him, but Eroan was different. Lysander was different too. The idea that Alumn could be dragon was preposterous.

"Some things Rhadgar said to me... they're right, feel true. The Alumn in my dreams calls me north. She's in ice somewhere. She saved me to find her. I know this, Eroan."

"Rhadgar was persuasive, you said. Charming even." Eroan hadn't known what to make of this Rhadgar who had apparently been *reasonable*. It was more likely he was taking advantage of Lysander's hopes, trying to lure him along like a fish near the bait. He'd felt a twang of jealousy when Lysander had spoken of the other dragon, his eyes full of awe. Akiem had done them all a favor by getting rid of Rhadgar.

"You think he fooled me?"

Eroan looked up at the stars. "I think he was dragon."

Lysander leaned closer, his lips broadening into a grin. "I know he told tales to keep me with him, but there was truth in it."

Eroan's gaze briefly flicked to Akiem, sleeping on the other side of the clearing. When he returned his attention to Lysander, the dragon's eyes glinted with the same challenge Eroan had never been able to resist. "When you find this Silver," he whispered, "what will you do?" Lysander was so close now, Eroan was sure he could hear how his heart pattered faster. "Will you free her like you did the Gold?"

"That was an accident." Lysander's warm hand swept up Eroan's cheek. "But you fear I might?"

Eroan tried and failed to resist leaning into the touch. "I fear a great many things, but never you."

"Hm..." Lysander purred, tilting Eroan's face toward him, but if Eroan admired his dragon, he'd fall into the promise of more that strummed between them and now was not the time to indulge in what his body wanted—*needed*. He straightened a leg on the ground, shifting out of the cross-

legged position now that it had suddenly become too tight and uncomfortable.

Lysander's hand roamed over Eroan's thigh, the touch frustratingly light. Eroan almost grabbed the hand and placed it where he needed it to be, but again, he reminded himself they were exposed, possibly being hunted, and the black prince dozed just a few meters away. Trey and Seraph could be back any minute. These were not times in which to dally with dragons.

"Your brother is right there," Eroan murmured.

Lysander's hand grew heavier. His fingers dug in and raked higher, stealing Eroan's breath.

"He won't care," Lysander whispered, his breath so close it tickled Eroan's jaw. "He's seen far worse."

Eroan could imagine exactly the kind of things both dragons had witnessed under Elisandra. "Elves are different. We don't display our desires for all to see."

Lysander's scandalous hand found its target, the ridge in Eroan's trousers, and brushed lightly over the bulge. "This says they aren't."

Eroan snatched at his wrist and held it steady. He'd meant to push him off, to regain some control of the situation, but instead, he held Lysander's hand firmly against his crotch, the heat of him soaking through the leather. A similar heat pulsed through Eroan's arousal, parting his lips with a small gasp.

Eroan swallowed and glanced again at the sleeping black prince. When Lysander's hand began to move, to *massage* in a way that dumped all thoughts from Eroan's head, Eroan faced Lysander's flickering cheek and imagined running his tongue down the firm line of his jaw. "You are impossible," Eroan ground out the words, unable to keep the need from his voice.

Lysander adjusted his position, turning almost chest-to-chest with Eroan, looking him in the eye as his hand molded around Eroan's erection and stroked in a way that had pleasure coiling low in Eroan's spine. Lysander's heated gaze danced over Eroan's face, reading everything.

"We should go somewhere..." Eroan suggested, breathless.

"And leave my scheming brother alone?" Lysander's fingers pinched.

Eroan's hips involuntarily twitched. Alumn, there was too much leather between his need and Lysander's hand. Worse still, he could imagine Lysander's quick-witted mouth closing around his erection, and with

thoughts like those, he wasn't going to be able to stop this, if he even had a chance of stopping this before now.

Eroan gripped Lysander's shoulder, feeling the male's hard muscles shift as his hand worked and then Lysander's mouth sealed his with a slow, lazy kiss. His tongue teased and Eroan chased it, needing more. Lysander lowered his weight over Eroan, straddling Eroan's thighs, and now Eroan was pinned, Lysander's hand working its tingling magic between them, the dragon's smile like something wicked and wrong but so sinfully good.

Lysander rolled his hips, grinding over Eroan's erection, and pushed in, his chest pressed against Eroan's, his eyes aglow. "Gods, I want you like this, beneath me, your eyes fucking me while I fuck you."

Eroan groaned and didn't care now that Akiem was close by or that Seraph might stumble in on them. He wanted his dragon in him, *ached* for it even, and wanted to see the passion in his eyes as he came. He couldn't imagine anything more excruciatingly erotic. The thought had him breathlessly holding back, trying to reel in the runaway desire before the hand on his cock had him coming too soon.

A whistle pierced the quiet. Lysander rocked back, his hand freeing Eroan.

Akiem gasped awake, his gaze snapping straight to Lysander. "You smell that?"

"Metal," Lysander growled, rising off Eroan. "Grab your sword, elf," he said to Eroan, his sideways grin a secret meant only for him. "We're no longer alone."



TREY WALKED them silently through the brush to the sounds of dragon grunts and huffs ahead. He'd heard the sounds while patrolling with Seraph and whistled the alarm. But in the moments it had taken Eroan to gather his wits after Lysander had scattered them, and have them all stalking through the undergrowth, the sounds hadn't moved from where Trey had first heard them. As they emerged onto the edge of a small plain, it became clear why the dragon hadn't moved.

Someone had staked it down. The dragon, a small jeweled, had a tangle of vines and rope around it, difficult to see in the moonlight, but Eroan's

eyes picked up the familiarity of it. He smelled blood too. The kit was wounded.

Lysander made a move to break from cover and investigate. Eroan shot out an arm and blocked him with a shake of his head. “Elf trap,” he whispered.

Lysander crouched back beside him. “A what?”

“We use kits as bait, stab them—leaving the blade in the wound, preventing them from shifting—tie them down, and see what comes hunting.”

Lysander looked again at the sight in the grass ahead. After a moment, his eyes narrowed. “It’s jeweled but I smell metal.”

“The blood?” Eroan could smell the scent of something unusual, something different. Woodsmoke and mead. His memory hitched, but the source eluded him.

“No,” Akiem answered from Lysander’s other side. “Definitely dragon but... different.”

Eroan glanced to his left at Trey and Seraph, waiting on his word. He sent Trey off to stalk around the area with a simple nod. The assassins melted silently into the dark.

The young, trapped dragon pawed at the ground. Seraph had killed one just like it, losing the tip of her ear in the process of tying it down. This one might wriggle free given enough time. Eroan didn’t plan on letting that happen but he also wasn’t about to leap into killing the jeweled when clearly someone was deliberately trying to lure them out of hiding.

Trey returned moments later. “Whoever it is knows how to hide. There’s no sign of anyone but us.”

Eroan turned to Lysander, to ask his opinion, when Akiem strode from their cover, head up, shoulders back, typically prince-like. Lysander swore under his breath. Eroan hunkered down and watched.

“What’s he doing?” Seraph whispered.

Akiem reached the dragon and stroked a hand up its snout. Rather than calm this beast, his actions further agitated it. It pulled against the vines, making them creak.

“Eroan?” Seraph asked. “Should we stop him?”

Eroan tensed, his heart rate picking up. Akiem ran his hand over the dragon’s head, up its small crown, and down its neck. The beast panted and

twitched. Its eyes rolled, and if its jaws hadn't been clamped shut, it would have been spewing fire.

Akiem said something but the dragon's struggles muffled his words. The dragon prince then pulled something from the beast's side. Magic warped the air, twisting it over the sight of dragon.

"He's freeing it," Eroan said.

Akiem used the knife he'd found in its side to slash the vines. With just two cuts, the dragon was able to yank its head free. It screeched its roar, tore the remaining restraints down, and spread its wings, bigger and more ferocious now that it was free. The young dragon was too enraged to be grateful.

Eroan saw the flicker of murderous intent the same time as Lysander must have. Lysander bolted from cover. The young dragon breathed in, filling its enormous lungs with air, and its firepit blazed, its glare fixing on Akiem.

The black prince merely looked up at it, not shifting, not protecting himself.

He wanted this.

He'd die.

"Stop!" Lysander ran forward, but the kit was beyond seeing anything. It hurt, it feared, it was now free, and it was going to kill anything in its way.

Eroan broke cover as the shift tore through Lysander, ripping him open and filling him up, filling the space between Eroan and the kit with emerald dragon. It happened so fast Eroan could only watch as Lysander's huge jaws came down around the young dragon's neck and snapped shut, instantly silencing it and its fire. He flung the body aside and whirled on Akiem, roaring out his frustration inches from where the black prince stood.

"That's quite enough of that," a tart female voice said, cutting through the thunderous roar.

Eroan slowed, dragonblade in his hand. A dragon in woman form walked from the bushes. Her silvery hair hung loose and smooth about her shoulders, graceful in the same way he remembered her being in the tower kitchens. She wore a heavy overcoat, not aprons.

He lowered the sword, wary.

Both princes stared at her, one dragon, one man. Akiem's face was easier to read, revealing confusion and alarm.

“Akiem, if you want to die, you merely have to ask the elf. He will gladly see it done.” Carline swept a hand in Eroan’s direction and spared him a small, knowing smile.

Eroan swallowed. She had once offered him kindness in a place where kindness had been alien. “Carline,” he greeted when Akiem said nothing. Lysander was still dragon and staring like he didn’t believe she was real.

“Elf,” she replied.

“I have a name.”

“Oh, I have not forgotten it.”

He wanted to trust her, this relic of the old-world, but couldn’t. She was dragon. She was *Gold*, and she’d tricked both Lysander and Akiem out into the open, and him too. Seraph and Trey wisely stayed back.

“Close your mouth, Lysander,” she said.

The thirty-thousand-pound dragon obeyed.

“Carline...” Akiem finally found his voice. “You were tracking us?”

“I was. There’s only so much north and you four are not nearly as discreet as you believe yourselves to be. Come now. Let us light a fire.” When she again looked at Eroan, she said, “We have much to discuss.”

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CHAPTER 18



Lysander

CARLINE WAS HERE.

Lysander wanted to ask about his wing. About the gem. About being Gold, and whether she meant them harm, and if she knew Alumn, where was Dokul, were the bronze close by. But mostly he just wanted to ask about his wing. She'd promised to heal him. He'd given her the amethyst. She was back, and fully restored as Gold. She owed him.

"Lysander?"

He blinked. She'd asked a question and he hadn't been listening. Eroan stood behind her, keeping to the edges of where the firelight reached, wary and on alert, as he should be. Lysander couldn't help the way his attention drifted to Eroan. The world was shifting beneath his feet. He needed his stubborn elf by his side more than he'd ever admit to anyone here, including Eroan.

"I..." Lysander cleared his throat. "You asked something?"

Carline tutted. "Your head in the clouds again, prince?"

Akiem smiled, and Lysander tossed him a glare. The fool had been trying to get himself killed. If Lysander hadn't been so angry, he could have tried his gaze on the kit. Instead, he'd killed it, like a typical dragon.

"Goodness, the princely kits never did stop fighting." Carline said this to Seraph, perhaps sensing the young elf needed some help warming up to

her. Seraph appeared bemused by the whole encounter while next to her, Trey observed, as though he became fully aware the elves in the group now numbered the same as the dragons.

Carline sighed. "I have dire news." She looked at Eroan. The elf's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "The Bronze chief has a flight of over a thousand. Most are jeweled, *adopted* when the tower fell and from weaker broods in mid-France and Spain. I have a number of spies among his flight. They tell me he was flying north, to where he believed you to be, Lysander, but has since adjusted his course. It could be he learned you had moved on and were once again in the wind. He now heads east."

"East?" Eroan asked, coming forward.

"He seeks to draw you out, elf, knowing Lysander will follow." An astute move for Dokul. He wouldn't have normally thought of such a thing. Perhaps the bronze was learning. "What is east?" Carline asked.

Eroan's face paled. "Ashford," he whispered. Not so much a question as a statement.

Seraph gasped and Trey uttered something Lysander didn't catch. Then this Ashford place was precious to elves? He'd not heard of it and tried not to take that to heart. Had Eroan not trusted him enough to tell him of this Ashford?

"We must go, Eroan." Trey was on his feet and facing up to Eroan. "You and me and Seraph. Now. The dragons cannot be allowed to breach Ashford."

"I know," Eroan replied, too calmly. "How long?" he asked Carline.

"Nine days, maybe ten, depending on the wind."

"It'll be eight days before we can reach Ashford by foot," Trey said. "That's too long. It's too long! Alumn... Eroan, what do we do?"

"Just... Give me a moment to think." Eroan's cheek fluttered. "How do they know of Ashford? Only a select few elves know it exists."

"It doesn't matter how! We have to go, now," Trey urged.

Carline replied, "An elf is feeding him information."

"An elf?"

"My spies tell me he is called Nye."

Eroan staggered, dropped, and braced himself against the ground. Lysander swallowed the instincts to rush to his side. Carline already knew his feelings for Eroan were strong, but he didn't want to give her more ammunition to use against him. He still reeled from her appearance and

didn't yet know whether to trust it. Or her. Going to Eroan, showing the affection he felt, was a weakness among dragons.

"Nye?" Eroan gasped. He bowed his head and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. His braid fell forward, slipping from his downcast shoulders. "I should have killed him."

"Eroan," Trey's voice deepened, covering a new tremor. "There is no time for this. We must go." They said much, these elves, without saying it aloud. Eroan feared he'd made a mistake in not killing Nye, but instead of agreement, anger flared in Trey's eyes. He *cared* for Nye.

Nye. The elf who had poisoned Lysander. It seemed as though elves schemed more than dragons.

"I can't." Eroan's blue eyes settled on Lysander. "I'm not leaving."

"You must." Trey scooped up his bags. He'd leave with or without Eroan.

"Lysander?" Eroan asked.

Lysander couldn't go. Gods, he wanted to. He did. But Carline was here and the Silver dragon in the north? He hadn't yet learned to be all he could be. There was too much at stake. His fate was elsewhere. Dokul was wrong. Lysander couldn't follow Eroan, not this time.

"I can't."

"Then I'm staying with you."

Trey breathed out hard. "This is Ashford. I understand your desire to stay. You know I understand. I always have. That's why I left Cheen with you. That's why I'm here. But if Ashford falls, there is nothing left, Eroan. We need you."

"You don't need me."

"We do. For Alumn's sake. For Janna's sake, and your child's future—"

Eroan shot to his feet. "They cast me out! They ordered my death! I will not return to fight for them."

Lysander reeled inside. Eroan had a child? And Janna... the pregnant elf and Seraph entwining her two fingers together. Eroan and Janna. They were mated. The path became clear suddenly. This had to happen. "It's all right," he heard himself say. "Go back." It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would, but then he wasn't allowing himself to think on it. The pain would come later.

Eroan's throat moved as he swallowed. "I'm not leaving you again."

Lysander got to his feet. “My destiny calls me north and yours calls you east. This is how it will always be—dragon against elf—unless we change things. And we can change things. I know it because Alumn has told me. We will be together, but not yet.” It broke his heart to say it because he wanted so desperately for it not to be so. Why did it have to be them? Why couldn’t some other dragon and elf stop the fighting? But it was always going to be Eroan. He’d known it since first seeing him, chained and defiant. Eroan Illanea was meant for great things. And Lysander would be too. But to be great, he needed to be whole.

Eroan’s eyes darted over them all. He took a step back. Lysander locked his hands into fists at his sides to keep from going to him. If he closed this distance between them, he would beg Eroan to stay, and Eroan would. And nothing would change. Eroan’s people would die. Dokul would wipe them out, searching for Lysander.

“I promised you...” Eroan said, his face falling, dragging Lysander’s heart with it.

“You haven’t broken anything. We will have our time.”

With his eyes glassy, Eroan met Seraph’s gaze. She nodded, either telling him it was okay or that she would stand with him whatever he chose.

Carline got to her feet, knees popping. “Lysander will follow you in eleven days, elf.”

She seemed sure of that. Lysander wasn’t as certain. There was much to be done and he still had no idea how to do it.

“I will have my spies delay the Bronze chief.” Carline took Eroan’s hand and he allowed it. She patted his hand as though fond of him, like she had done a hundred times with Lysander. “There will be time. Your dragon will come back to you. This, I promise.”

Eroan’s jaw worked. “I will hold you to your word, old woman.”

“I know you will, Eroan Illanea. I know. Now say your goodbyes. There is much to do and no time to waste.” She turned to Akiem, rousing him from his thoughts. “And you, you have much to make up for. Lysander doesn’t need you, but the elves do. Travel with them. Protect them.”

“What makes you think I’ll listen to you now when I never have before?”

“Oh come now,” she scoffed. “You cannot fool an old dragon. They are growing on you. Are they not? There once was a time elf and dragon

worked side by side. Of course, those days are long gone. But they needn't be."

While Akiem grumbled and Trey and Seraph cleared the camp, Eroan drew Lysander aside with a single glance. A heavy silence fell between them, the weight of it full of things needing to be said. The moon and stars shifted, time passing, but still, neither spoke. Eroan gestured again and lured Lysander farther from the group's background chatter until almost all the sound of company had vanished and Lysander only heard his own heart beating too loud.

"Will you be safe with the Gold?" Eroan asked.

"I trust Carline more than I trust my brother." He hesitated, lowering his voice, "I will come to you... I don't know when, but I will."

"You could come now. We'd be together?" Eroan said, his eyes hopeful.

"I can't." Lysander gathered the elf's hands in his. Eroan looked down between them, at their hands together, and then up again. The hurt in his eyes was a raw, terrible thing to witness. Eroan Ilanea, exposed and vulnerable.

Eroan didn't understand. Maybe nobody could.

"My whole life I've been caged. I don't want someone to cut my ropes for me. I want to cut my own ropes. Does that make sense?"

Hurt crossed Eroan's face and Lysander feared he'd said the wrong thing. He'd never been good with words, and with Eroan, he wanted everything to be perfect all of the time. But it wasn't and it wouldn't be.

"You're Eroan Ilanea."

Eroan frowned, and again Lysander kicked himself for not being able to say exactly how he felt. He stepped closer, breathing in elf and freedom and filling his heart with it, knowing he'd need it in the days and nights ahead.

Lysander pushed closer and bowed his forehead against Eroan's. "You're like the stars to me." He looked up into blue eyes. Eroan was watching, listening. "When I could fly, I would chase them and chase them, flying all night, knowing I'd never catch them but hoping one day something would change, that I'd be better or faster or stronger and I'd catch one. Just one. That was all I wanted. One star in my life. You feel like that star, like an impossible thing I don't deserve."

"Lysander, I—"

"No, just listen. If I don't say it now, I might never say it. You are my guiding star, Eroan Ilanea. It's not possible to love anyone more than I love

you. You crossed the sea for me, you faced dragon hordes for me. When I thought I had nothing and nobody left, you came for me. You keep saving me. Every damn day you save me, and by the great ones, I don't deserve it. I don't deserve you, but I will. I'm going to be powerful. I'm going to be worthy. I'll bring the world to its knees for you. I'll rip the stars from the sky for you, because you deserve more. You deserve a fucking king, not a broken prince."

Eroan tore his hand free and grabbed Lysander by the back of his neck, pulling him in so tight it hurt. The fierceness burning in his icy eyes had Lysander's breath catching. "You are not broken," Eroan growled. "You burn bright in the dark, brighter than any star. You're the warmth in my veins, you're the reason my heart beats at all. It beats for you. I live for you. I can't lose you. Do you hear me, *Lysander*? I can't lose you again. I can't live without you." Eroan's mouth crashed into his and Lysander kissed him breathlessly back. The desperate need in it had him wanting to roar at the world for making this be a goodbye and not a beginning.

Eroan broke free, gasping. "Don't change for me," he whispered. "I love who and what you are. If you must change, change for you. You are free, Lysander. The choices are all yours. Choose for you. Go. Discover who you are, and when you return, I'll be waiting."

Emotion lodged in Lysander's throat. Eroan's words were real. He clutched at them as though they were a precious gift. Love. Eroan Ilanea, his stupid, stubborn elf loved him. His heart soared. He looked Eroan in the eyes, touched his cheek, marveling at how Eroan felt so vulnerable in this moment, but also a shining light of strength.

Eroan slowly eased from his touch and backed up. Adjusting his sword against his back, his jaw firmly locked, he nodded once, turned, and vanished into the dark.

Lysander let his eyes close and staggered where he stood. Every fiber of his being ached to follow, to go with Eroan, to follow him to the ends of the earth. Tilting his head back, he looked up at those stars. They blurred now, swimming in unshed tears. Gods, why did it have to be this way? But he would make a difference. He would go north, he'd answer the Silver's summons, and he'd heal again. He'd be the emerald he was born to be. And finally, all dragonkin would bow to him. For Eroan, he'd return a king, or he wouldn't return at all.



LYSANDER WENT BACK to the camp, sensing the elves had left long before arriving, to find just Carline waiting for him. She looked him over, head to toe, still somehow conveying concern and care despite dragons not possessing those things. Lysander expected to view her differently, knowing what she was, but he saw only the dragon who had cared when no one else did.

“Don’t betray my trust in you.” He hadn’t meant for it to sound like a plea, but it came out like one. His battered heart couldn’t take another shock. He wanted Carline to be everything he’d assumed over the years, even knowing she was Metal.

“I did all I could for you,” she said, her shoulders lifting, back straightening. The weight of years sloughed off her, leaving her tall and proud.

He stood in front of her now, feeling the terrible weight of a dragon such as her push down on him. He hadn’t felt it before, but that had been the gem’s doing. Now she was everything he hated about his own kind. Or was she?

“Akiem believes you’re just like Dokul. That’s why Elisandra locked you away.”

“And what do you believe?”

“These days, I don’t know anymore.”

“You were always different.” She lifted her hand. “My diamond in the rough.”

Lysander caught her wrist, keeping her hand hovering inches from his face. “We had a deal, remember?”

“I had not forgotten, and I meant those words. Now I am restored, I can heal your wing.”

He locked his jaw, grinding his teeth to keep the sob from breaking free. She saw it in his eyes anyway and smiled. When she pushed, he freed her hand, letting her warm, healer’s hand spread across his cheek. He could feel it too. The tingle of magic, a touch just like his own.

“I was trapped because I did not want war. I’m a healer at heart. You know this inside because we are the same, prince. Your mother trapped us both and all I could do was watch over you, chained as I was.”

All the times he'd seen her stare out of the tower windows, all the times she'd been waiting for him, alone in the kitchens, ready to hear his words or heal his wounds, and not once had he known she too suffered in silence. "Why didn't you say something?"

She lowered her hand and pressed it to his chest, tears brimming her eyes. "If your mother had learned I'd told you, she'd have killed you. My silence protected us both."

Warmth pulled at Lysander's skin beneath her hand and the center of him unfurled, opening, allowing the healer's touch to soak inside and lure his own magic out from deep within.

"You dream of her... the Silver?"

"Yes. She's calling me north."

Carline pulled her hand back, breaking the connection. "Then we must get you healed. The journey ahead will not be an easy one and you have a stubborn elf waiting for you."

He smiled softly, relieved to hear the fondness in her voice for Eroan. "You told him to protect me."

"I did." She sighed and brushed her old robes down. "Long ago, so long I wonder if I dreamed it, elves were our protectors too, and more... They lost their love, lost their way, just like the rest of us. But Eroan Ilanea has an old soul. He reminds me of those early ones."

Yes, it was time to make a difference. "Heal me, Carline. Help me change the world."

"And that, dear prince, is exactly what I've been waiting for you to say." She thrust both hands against his chest, delivering a shock of warmth. It rolled over and through Lysander, tipping the world upside down. He fell, but where the ground should have caught him, he went through it, falling into the warmth, drowning in it, breathing it in.

"Trust me, prince." Carline's gold eyes flashed in the dark.

A flutter of fear tightened his chest, but the swift push of her hands pushed it away. He trusted her. She was Carline, the dragon who had tended his wounds, both seen and unseen; the dragon he'd gone to when all was lost. She was good. She had to be good.

Her eyes scorched, her power filling him up, holding him down.

He tasted blood, tasted bitter metal. A memory of Dokul flashed; stark and blinding, the dragon holding him down, teeth in his throat. Lysander gasped.

“Do not fight ...”

He was drowning. The weight of metal fell over him, burying him in darkness. Too much. It was too much.

He blinked, slowly becoming aware of how he'd tucked himself into the corner of the abandoned building, and of how Carline looked on, her eyes full of regret and pity.

It had failed. His wing was still broken. *He* was still broken.

He breathed hard, taking the sweet night air into his lungs to clear the stench of metal. “I can do this. I just... give me a moment.”

“You must surrender yourself to me.”

“I can...” He wiped at his face with a trembling hand. “I can do this.”

Carline knelt beside the fire. “Come, prince. Come sit beside me. I will tell you the story of how the world used to be and of how it can be again.”

She began speaking, talking of dragons and the time before the ice, when the world was so very different, and Lysander crawled closer, taking up the spot beside her. She spoke of elves and humans and dragons, of how they had once lived together, each helping the other. Until the dragons grew jealous of the humans and their wealth of land. The races split, each becoming weaker because of it. Elves lost their magic. Dragons lost their compassion. Humans lost their integrity. And so the end of the world began. Humans fought dragons and elves couldn't stop either. The lands changed. Continents broke apart. Ice swallowed the world and the last of the metals with it.

Humans, ingenious creatures that they were, survived the age of ice and built their new world on top of it. Elves lived on in the shadows. But the dragons would always return, and as human activity warmed the world again, the ice melted, revealing its terrible secret. Silver, Gold, and Bronze tore free. They saw how the humans had spread and of how they warred all over the world, destroyed it anew.

Enraged, the Bronze chief self-reproduced and reared a devastating brood of dragons. They all bore the same raging madness. On seeing the viciousness of the Bronze, the Silver—Alumn—tried to confront him, but she alone was no match for Dokul. He tore her apart over northern skies and watched her body fall into the sea. Gold, caught between Dokul's savage necessity and Alumn's shining light, played both sides, trying to mediate Dokul's rage. But then the humans unleashed their weapon and a new race of dragon evolved. The jeweled.

Lysander rested his head against Carline's shoulder, her soft voice lulling his mind and heart.

"The rest you know."

"Why did you not kill Dokul?" he whispered. Had Dokul died all those centuries ago, things might have been very, very different.

"Fear. He'd kill me and dying never helped anyone. And besides, why do you not kill Akiem?"

"I sometimes think he can change, that he wants to change but doesn't know how."

She nodded. "I know now that Dokul cannot change. His reign must end, and you can end it, prince. Alumn speaks to you. She waits for you. Together, we can heal her and together we will stop Dokul for good. But I must heal you, and for that, you must trust me."

Lysander breathed in, filling his chest. The air smelled warm and sweet, and still a little of elf and pine and freedom. "I'm ready."

This time, when her hands spread over his chest, he let the fear fall away. This had to happen. If it didn't, nothing would change. And if he was wrong about Carline, he'd survive. He had to survive. For the first time in forever, there was a light ahead of them all, one he could finally catch and hold in his hands. The light of hope.

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CHAPTER 19



Eroan

THE TREK back to his settlement took entirely too long, but they managed it in two days, traveling through the night. Eroan hadn't realized how much he'd feared his new home had been destroyed in their absence until he'd seen the flickering torchlights and breathed out. Nye could have told Dokul of this place, so perhaps Nye hadn't lost all reason.

Chloe greeted them with a broad smile that quickly turned to concern at the sight of their weariness and without Lysander among them.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I will tell you, but..." He drew her to one side while Trey and Seraph escorted Akiem to a hut. The dragon was getting stronger every day. "Ashford is going to be attacked."

"Ashford?"

"An elven stronghold. Dokul is on his way there with a dragon horde. He has Nye." He didn't need to say anymore. The implications were clear. Everything Nye knew, so did Dokul. Eroan had thought of little else as he'd fought through the landscape, each step taking him farther away from where he truly wanted to be, who he truly wanted to be with. "I need every elf who can carry a blade. Human too, if you're willing to fight with us?"

Chloe didn't hesitate. "Of course. I'll spread the word. I assume we leave immediately?"

Eroan nodded tightly. “Give me a little while... There’s something I need to do.” He followed Seraph’s and Trey’s path and entered the hut they’d taken Akiem to. The black prince had shrugged off his coat, clearly making himself at home. Eroan crossed the small hut in a few strides, grabbed the dragon by the neck, and pinned him to the wall.

Akiem winced, but his smile grew. “I wondered when you’d snap, elf.”

“When I do, you won’t see it coming, *dragon*.” Eroan squeezed and a little of Akiem’s smile broke off. “Don’t mistake this truce as my acceptance of you. Just because Lysander hasn’t killed you, it doesn’t mean I won’t.”

Akiem breathed through his nose, his dark eyes drinking in Eroan. “If I wanted to betray you, I’d have done so already.”

And that was what Eroan couldn’t understand. Why was Akiem still here? He was strong enough to take flight, to go anywhere, why stay? And he wasn’t buying the “nowhere else to go” excuse. A dragon with both wings could go anywhere.

“We’re going to Ashford. You’re either with us or against, and I’ve seen nothing to convince me of either, so convince me now or I kill you here.”

“I killed the emerald—”

“Don’t try to tell me that was for Lysander. You did that because you knew what that dragon could do, and right now, I’m inclined to believe you’ll do the same to Lysander if—when—*when* he returns. You’re a dragon of the worst kind, the type who weaves his lies around his victims.”

A strange kind of wicked delight sparkled in the prince’s eyes. “If you know me so well, kill me already.”

Eroan let him go and stepped away, taking the sword from his back. He should do it. He couldn’t spare the resources to have this dragon watched and taking Akiem to Ashford was only marginally less worse than having Dokul go there. And yet he hesitated. Something held him back, some niggling thought he couldn’t latch onto.

“Do it,” Seraph urged, appearing at his side. “For Xena, for the hundreds he killed at the estuary,” she stepped forward, freeing her blade, “for our home he burned to ashes.”

Akiem’s smile grew. “Must you wait for his permission, little elfling?”

“Oh, he’ll kill you, won’t you, Eroan.” She smiled back at him.

Eroan’s fingers twitched around the sword handle. He avoided Seraph’s glance and the frown that followed it.

“Won’t you, Eroan,” she repeated, turning toward him.

Akiem lunged, caught Seraph by the neck and yanked her struggling against his chest. She lifted the sword, but Akiem caught it with his free hand and tore it from her fingers, tossing it to the ground. “Neither of you is worthy of those blades. You don’t even know where they came from, do you? Lysander never told you. And you wield them like you own them. You play games you don’t even understand.”

Seraph kicked and bucked, but Akiem had more strength at his disposal than his human body belied. He could break Seraph’s neck in a twitch. She wasn’t getting free.

“Eroan, kill him! Kill him! Do it!” she hissed and spat.

Eroan held the dragon’s gaze. “You want to die.”

Akiem’s grin revealed sharp teeth but he didn’t deny it.

“You hate yourself.” The dragon’s glare fractured. Just a flicker. Had Eroan not been looking for the reveal, he’d have missed it. “You failed in everything. You couldn’t protect amethyst and the tower fell. Under Dokul, you suffered unspeakable things. You didn’t come to me for sanctuary, you came to me to die.”

Akiem threw Seraph forward. Eroan caught her, holding her tightly before she could whirl around and stab Akiem. She looked up at him, her eyes begging for blood, but as much as he wanted to kill this dragon, he couldn’t.

She tore from his arms and fled the hut. Eroan nodded for Trey to follow her, leaving him alone with Akiem.

Akiem swayed on his feet, then dropped to his knees. “Do it.”

“No.” Eroan replaced his blade and picked up Seraph’s before Akiem could take it and do himself harm. “I know what it feels like, hating yourself for the things you couldn’t do and for the things done to you. You should suffer, dragon. It’s all you deserve. But you have a choice. You’re free too, just like Lysander. No more Elisandra. No more Dokul. And maybe you mourn that or perhaps you’re finally seeing how things can be different.”

Eroan offered his hand.

Akiem looked up, disbelief widening his eyes.

“Fight for good alongside me.”

Eroan needed this dragon. His elves—even with those of Cheen and Ashford picking up arms—would not be enough. He needed the black

prince's strength and his vicious mind if they had any chance of prevailing.

Still, the prince blinked at him.

Eroan leaned in, hand still extended. "You will die. You'll get your wish, I promise you that, but not before Dokul pays for what he did to Lysander and to you. Take my hand, Akiem."

Akiem gripped Eroan's hand, letting Eroan pull him to his feet. They stood a moment, each staring at the other, hands gripped, history thick between them.

Eroan let go. "We leave at dawn." He turned and left the hut, ready to rally his pride, and after that, Cheen. He could only pray to Alumn that he'd make it in time and that it would be enough.



THREE DAYS LATER, dusklight had the horizon burning and long shadow-fingers reached across the large forest clearing outside Cheen. A storm had rolled in while Eroan had been away, flattening this part of the forest, making the perfect neutral ground.

Seraph stood to Eroan's right, Trey to his left. His pride—some thirty humans and elves in total—stood behind. Not enough to battle a bronze force, but enough to show Cheen his intent.

Flame torches bobbed through the trees, signaling the approach of Order elves.

Eroan swallowed, tasting the beat of his racing heart. Anye had made it clear he wouldn't be welcome if he ever returned. But she would have to listen. The fate of all elves depended on her believing him.

He'd trained many of the elves slowly emerging from the shadows, fought alongside them, grieved and triumphed with them. They had chosen to stay in Cheen. And he didn't blame them for that. It wasn't just Anye he needed to convince.

"Eroan Ilanea," the elder said, her voice the only sound over that of the flame torches licking the air. She wore the trousers and tightly fitted leather jacket of the village gatherers. It suited her more than the elder robes, made her seem younger. With her hair bound, the Cheen tattoos marking her neck stood stark against her skin. "I've answered your summons out of respect for the Order, but we will not take you back among our fold."

“I’m not here for that.”

She lifted her chin. Her attention flicked behind him to the force he’d brought along. Did she think he meant to attack?

Torches fluttered, their flames shifting shadows around.

Eroan counted just fifteen Order elves behind Anye, but there would be more unseen among the trees. They were likely flanking them too, coming in behind, closing the net. When faced with a threat, Eroan would have advised the same thing.

“The Bronze chief, Dokul, has a flight of a thousand or more,” he said aloud, lifting his voice so the quiet carried it far into the forest. “He’s approaching Ashford as we speak.” Murmurs rippled. No gasps, the Order were too restrained for that. “If we combine forces and leave now, there’s a chance we may reach them before his flight.”

Anye’s steely eyes sharpened. “How do you know this?”

“I have... a source.”

“This information came from dragons. Don’t deny it. Speak the truth for once.” She almost spat the final words at his feet.

Eroan swallowed the anxious flutter. “It did. The Gold to be precise.”

She scoffed. “And you expect me to hand over the rest of the Order on the word of a *Metal dragonkin*?”

“No, I expect you to hand over your Order elves and any resident of Cheen who can fight in Ashford’s defense.”

“Eroan,” she sighed, “what happened to you? Where did we go wrong?” She stepped closer and lifted her hands but stopped short of cupping his face like a doting mother would. Eroan leveled her with his gaze, searching her eyes. Hers were full of compassion and pity. “Xena once told me how you had the potential to be great,” she said. “She loved you, you know. To see you here, like this, it would break her heart.”

“Take that back!” Seraph stepped forward. “If Xena were here, she’d help us. Instead, you’re too afraid to even consider how we can make things better. Dragons are coming and you can’t see past your own—”

“Hush, child!” Anye snapped back. “Your devotion to Eroan blinds you to how he has been corrupted by the dragon prince.”

“He hasn’t—”

“It’s all right,” Eroan interrupted, turning his head to catch her eye. As much as he appreciated Seraph’s attempt, this was going to take more

persuading than he'd hoped. But he'd come prepared. Stubborn elves weren't changed by words, they were changed by actions.

Eroan rolled his tongue and whistled through his teeth, pitching the sharp noise high and short. In the quiet that followed, Anye's gaze thinned, her patience fading fast.

For a moment, nothing changed. The Order looked on, a chasm between them and Eroan. One unlikely to be crossed by arguing.

Wing beats thumped the air. A blasting blanket of darkness flew in inches above them all, whipping up a storm of pine needles and leaves. Cheen's elves balked, scattering as a sudden winged darkness swallowed the sky. Eroan stood motionless, his only reaction squinting into the downdraft the dragon wings had churned up.

Akiem let out an earsplitting screech and landed behind Eroan's pride, his vast wings folding in, leaving the dragon no less intimidating. Golden eyes observed Cheen's scattered assassins. He snarled at them all, and to drive the point home, freed a deafening roar.

Eroan half-turned his head, catching the dragon in the corner of his eye. "Don't." One word. That was all. Akiem's rippling growls subsided. Reluctantly, Akiem lowered his head, submitting.

The wind settled, trees calmed, and a stunned quiet returned, broken only by Akiem's bellows breaths.

Anye had stumbled back behind three assassins. Her palpable fear stoked Eroan's determination to get this done. She'd lost all color, her skin as pale as her elder's robes.

"That's... that's not your dragon," the elder stammered, not even trying to straighten.

"Prince Akiem understands the need to stop Dokul just as I do. In this, we stand united."

Akiem snorted, the sound like a distant thunderclap, and bared his teeth in a shallow grin.

"Alumn, you brought that beast to Cheen!"

Frustration had Eroan's fists trembling at his side. Was it not enough that he had the black prince behind him? Was it not enough that he was here, trying to save these fools, despite them having made it clear his sacrifices meant nothing to them? Stepping forward, Anye's guards lifted their blades, threatening *him*.

“All I’ve ever done, I’ve done for my people, *for you*,” he raised his voice and addressed the others here. If Anye wouldn’t listen, perhaps they would. “You cast me out and still I fight for you! I’m not here to hurt any of you. I’m trying to save you, to save all of us. Dokul flies toward Ashford, and if he reaches them before we do, Ashford will fall. I wish it was lies, I wish I was bespelled because it would mean you are safe. But the fact is the Bronze knows of Ashford. He’ll destroy it all and our heritage with it. Elvenkind will never recover. Are you content to let that happen? Because I am not. I’ll take my single pride and fight him with just thirty of us if I must. I trained you all to *protect*. Curran trained you to do what is right. We are Assassins of the Order. We are blades forged to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. We are protectors, like our ancestors before us, and we will never give up. *Until it is done!*”

His words disappeared into the quiet, rippling farther than they should, seeking the souls of all those here. He saw it in their eyes, saw the flame ignite and their elven pride lift their chins.

Assassins crept out of the forest, filling the clearing. Dozens. Thirty. Forty. More. All of them, experienced and novice. His heart thudded harder. “Follow me. Help me protect Ashford and bring an end to this monster, stand with me, until it is done.”

“Eroan Ilanea!” someone cried. Another joined his voice and another. “Eroan, Eroan, Eroan,” their chanting beat in time with his heart. He lifted his blade. “For Ashford!”

“For Ashford!” the elves boomed, joined by the thunder of Akiem’s roar.

He had them. All of them. All but one.

Anye regarded Eroan with a cold stare. “Your mindless ambition will kill us all,” she said, echoing Nye’s words, before turning her back and striding away.



IN ALL, Eroan counted two hundred elves. Assassins, messengers, harvesters, fisher-folk, rangers. Anyone who could pick up a weapon and had the passion to fight.

“This will work,” Trey said beside him as the train of elves threaded through the forest, leaving Cheen.

Eroan clenched his jaw. Many wouldn’t return. “It has to.”

If they failed at Ashford, it would be the end of elves. He prayed to Alumn that Anye’s parting words didn’t come true. These two hundred would join Ashford’s own sizable Order, all seasoned fighters and killers, swelling their ranks to perhaps five hundred. They would still be outnumbered, but it only took a well-aimed dragontooth-tipped arrow to bring a dragonkin down.

Eroan hitched his traveling bag onto his shoulder, catching sight of a male with a hawk perched on *his* shoulder. Ross. The male glanced back toward Cheen’s center toward a waiting female elf: Janna. She had a babe cradled in the crook of her arm and a bow slung over her shoulder. Ross lifted his hand. She waved back.

The elfling babe reached for her mother. Janna smiled down and cooed the little one. The child’s chuckle reached Eroan’s ears. His heart hardened. He tore his gaze away and fell straight into Trey’s knowing expression.

“Ross must return,” was all Eroan could think to say. He pushed into motion, uplifting the roots that seemed to have tied him down.

Trey stuck beside him, ushering on the tail of the elven train. Despite their number, elf and human moved smooth and silent through the woods, like silk through fingers. Long ago, ancestors of both races had fought the greatest of battles. The humans had betrayed the elves that time, but that would not happen this time. Chloe’s men and women were strong and bold and brave.

Ashford was a ten-day trek.

They reached the outer hills in five.

Seraph weaved her way back through the procession. Eroan watched her approach. She hadn’t spoken a single word to him since he’d failed to kill Akiem.

“Eroan.” She drew him aside, speaking low and fast. “Our scouts have reached the moors.” She swallowed. “The skies over Ashford are black with dragons. Thousands, Eroan. Too many to count.”

They were too late?

“And Ashford?” he asked.

“Intact, as far as they can tell. The doors are sealed. It looks as though they’ve all gone to ground. The dragons haven’t attacked. They’re staying

outside the range of the ballista, just... waiting.”

They didn’t need to attack. They had the numbers. Their presence was the threat and they’d stay until Lysander gave himself up or the elves gave him up. But Dokul didn’t know the prince he wanted wasn’t here.

Eroan scanned the deceptively clear skies. “Find Trey. Have him pull the line back to the trees and make camp. No fires tonight.” He started forward.

“Where are you going?”

“To the front. To see the force myself.”

Veering from the elven ranks, he descended into a natural valley, keeping low in the grass and ferns. The river at its center narrowed. Eroan followed its course back up into the hills over Ashford’s underground position. Sticking to the exposed rocks, he hunkered down and spotted one of his scouts. No explanation was needed. The sky boiled with dragons. Jeweled and bronze. Scales, claws, wings, glinting in the sunlight. This wasn’t like the bronze warren, where the bronze had patrolled their wall. The numbers here dwarfed Dokul’s previous force. The displaced amethyst dragons were all here.

All because of Nye.

“I’ve never seen so many,” the scout whispered. “What do we do?”

“We hang back and prepare.” When they fought Dokul, they would fight as one united force, it was the only chance they’d have at holding the dragons off. “Set up a perimeter watch. Nobody strays from the trees. I’ll return tomorrow at dusk.” Eroan pushed from the rocks and headed for one of the many hidden doors into Ashford. And if that one didn’t work, he’d try another and another. There would be a way inside. Once in, he’d speak with Alador of the Higher Order and his sentinels. Ashford would not fall. It would hold, until Lysander came, just as Carline had said. He had no choice but to believe it.

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CHAPTER 20



Lysander

IT DIDN'T WORK.

Carline's healing hands were not enough and her sorry eyes only made it worse. "We try again," she said. "But as dragon. I must re-break your wing, prince."

They had tried as human, but the damage was too deep, too routed in Lysander's true form and Carline's healing was apparently stronger as dragon.

Frustrated, tired, aching, he shifted and eyed the deceptively docile old woman as her figure swelled, as the magic flooded in, stretching her, twisting her into golden scale and ferocious strength. He'd seen her as dragon in the tower, briefly, before it fell, but it didn't prepare him. She matched Dokul in size, perhaps even bigger. Muscular, like all metals, her wingspan alone was enormous. Her scales didn't shine. Gnarled and knobbled, she looked as though some great natural force had shaped her out of golden stone. He wondered, idly, if the Silver was equally as impressive.

He doubted himself. He doubted this drive to go north. He doubted everything. Trusting never came easy. He trusted Eroan. Trusted Seraph. None other. Carline knew much and so far she'd done nothing to hurt him, which made him all the more suspicious.

And now this?

Re-breaking his wing?

He hunkered down, his crippled wing exposed. The damn thing wouldn't stretch out. Carline as Gold loomed over him, blocking out the sun. She smelled of metal and the steady thrum of her magic tainted the back of his throat, stirring the embers in his firepit. She wasn't bronze, but she smelled like them. And when she bowed her head, opening her jaws, a reflexive growl rumbled through Lysander. She struck suddenly, leaving him no time to change his mind. Jagged, backward-facing teeth sank into his wing, tearing through membrane and muscle. Agony blazed, ripping a roar from deep inside. He scrabbled, heaving up great breaths, spilling fire from between his clenched teeth. *Alumn*, he begged, *why must everything hurt?*

If she heard, she didn't answer.

Bone snapped and crunched, pinched and ground between Carline's jaws.

It was too much. Too much! He screamed and let loose the flame, arcing it away from Carline, scorching the trees and ground nearby instead, making them burn, making the whole world burn.

There is no victory without sacrifice, prince, a smooth, cool voice said, or perhaps he'd imagined it because the pain had a hold of him now, burying him beneath its terrible weight. Lost in the dark, he thought of Eroan, of the way the elf smiled only for him, of the feel of his body beneath his hands, strong and warm and smooth. Silk and steel. Gods, he wanted to see him again. Just a moment, that was all he'd need. If that was all they had left, he'd take it. But to do that, he needed to be whole, to be strong, to be worthy. He would survive this, like he'd survived before.

"From the greatest of fires, the greatest of weapons is forged." He fell into the dreams, hearing her voice, wondering if any of this was real.



PAIN AND NOISE AND DRAGONS... so many dragons.

Lysander woke bathed in agony and to a hail of claws and gnashing teeth. Gold flashed in front of him, her roars splintering the earth. He shrank back, thoughts muddled and slow. What was this? Liquid fire washed over gold scales and splashed across his face. He threw his head

back, shielding his eyes from the worst of the heat. Carline? Had her betrayal come so soon?

But Carline wasn't attacking. She was faced away, wings fanned, *defending*.

Lysander lifted his head, looking skyward.

Dragons. He didn't know how many. A rogue flight or was Dokul among them? They plunged in, slashing at his back. Jaws snagged his crown, yanking his head back. Pain snapped down his neck. He twisted, throwing his weight forward, pulling the beast out of the air. Instinct flooded into his veins. The dragon slammed into the ground and Lysander was on it, teeth buried in its neck, down low, where the fire churned. He bit, feeling scale shatter. Acid burned his tongue. The dragon snapped at his face and neck, going for the vulnerable spot behind his broken crown. He slammed a foot down, smothering its snout, grinding the monster into the dirt. Liquid heat flushed up his back. Not fire. He whipped around and roared a wash of flame over the vicious diamond. A viscous liquid drooled from between its teeth, sizzling where he splashed across his wings. He lunged up, jaws open, and ripped the diamond from the air. More, he wanted more. And more came. He tore at them, unleashing the worst he could do until his green scales shone red with blood.

He'd kill them all. And wouldn't stop there.

Lust and power sizzled his thoughts, pulling them tight, making him *unstoppable*. Dragons fell. He trod their bones and blood into the dirt. Three remained, two on the wing, but one had fallen to its belly, shaking in its own puddle of piss. Lysander didn't need jaws to pin it down. He had it captured on the end of an invisible chain linked to that newly risen part of him. He could pull, and the beast would buckle. He had it, all of it. Its mind was weak, wild, scared. He loomed closer.

Mine.

Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.

He could do all those things and the jeweled would let it happen.

Power.

He breathed it, lived it, let it fill him up. He was bigger suddenly, he was *more*.

True power like he'd never had, like he'd never dreamed.

Not a broken thing. He was bigger, better, stronger.

Lifting his head, his gaze snared the two in-flight and pulled, yanking them to the ground. They submitted, falling over themselves, exposing their throats and bellies. Their desperation reeked, but oh how it smelled sweet to Lysander. The power was his. Utterly and completely. And now he knew why Elisandra had feared him, why emeralds were killed, why he'd been kept in the dark. Laughter bubbled inside his dragon-mind.

He flung his glare around and found the Gold, panting, bloody and exhausted. A Metal. One of the first.

Don't, the cool, silvery voice said.

Oh but he could. Advancing, he spread both his wings, vaguely aware that the broken wing tingled as it fully extended. That seemed important, but there was nothing more important now than making every damned dragon submit before him. And the metals... the wretched, vicious, bullying metals.

She fought, this one. Her eyes burned with defiance. But it didn't matter. She'd be his. They'd all be his.

Unstoppable. Powerful. Not a prince. Not a failure. Not broken.

A king.

And they'd all feel his wrath.

She snarled, this Gold, warning him off.

Madness stretched thin and snapped, driving Lysander forward. It wouldn't be until much later, when the setting sun flooded the land already set ablaze with hungry flame, devouring the carcass of the fallen Gold and the countless jeweled, that he'd understand what he'd done, and what he was capable of.

His flames devoured meadows and hills and forests and the flesh of every dragon he'd slaughtered, Gold scale glinting among them.

Carline had told Eroan that Lysander was the future. And she was right. This world would burn beneath him. He lifted his head, spread his wings and roared his promise. The king had risen and everything had changed.



HE IGNORED the Silver's call, pushed the dreams aside, and soared fast and high. Free. He was free at last, his wings kissing the air, his heart blazing.

The metals would pay.

They'd all pay.

Arriving at Rhadgar's old lands, the old king's scattered brood flocked to him, each one falling over themselves, scales rattling, panting, teeth bared. They were weak, but he'd make them strong. Disorganized and wild, but he'd make them vicious again, make them worthy. The weakest, he killed. They rotted where they fell. He flew on, snaring any dragon who crossed his path, until fear saturated his flight of dozens. Fear of him. They would fight for him, because they didn't have a choice. And that's what made emeralds so feared, so powerful. He owned every other dragon, like he'd owned his mother at the moment he'd choked the life out of her, like he'd owned Mirann at the coupling. It had always been inside of him, and now it was free. Now he was emerald.

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CHAPTER 21



Eroan

IT WAS NEVER MEANT to be this way.

Eroan jerked awake in the chair, the voice he'd heard already fading out of reach.

He rubbed at his face and leaned forward. Elves scurried back and forth, carrying books and pictures, trinkets and treasures of the old-world, taking them deep into Ashford's vaults.

Ashford's enormous tree drew his eye. Dust motes danced around it, lit by the skylight above. Cheen's had burned. Would this tree outlive him? A shadow swept over that light, briefly plunging the atrium into darkness. The dragons were still out there. An impossible number. A chill shivered through him.

He stood, shaking off the dread. Everything was going to work out. He'd arrived with his pride. Lysander would come. They'd hold the dragons off, maybe even push them back.

Pacing, the dregs of exhaustion fell away. He hadn't properly rested since leaving Lysander. There had been no time. And now he was here, inside Ashford, waiting to be seen, and this was taking too long.

A door slammed, drawing his eye.

"Eroan."

He almost didn't recognize Alador. The old elf wore battle-leathers sparkling with numerous blades. His long gray hair fell in braids down his back. Eroan had known Alador was of the Order, perhaps the original assassin, he was certainly old enough, but seeing the elder primed for battle was a stark reminder of how things had changed and were about to change again.

"How many do you have?" Alador asked, his voice echoing about the atrium. All the other elves, those not fighters, had retreated to the chambers buried deep into the hills. An equally formidable elf accompanied Alador. Sentinel Venali. Tall, with a cascade of red hair tied and pinned back from his face. Eroan had met him the last time he'd been here. He too was equally armed. Other Order elves fanned out, breaking off into prides.

"Two hundred," Eroan replied.

"We will need every single one." Alador waved Eroan on, urging him to follow, passing the tree and into a side room. A wooden table dominated the space. A map had been carved into its surface. A map of Ashford's many rooms and tunnels. Drawn to its detail, Eroan's thoughts stalled at Ashford's scale. The rooms and corridors went on for what seemed like miles.

"They don't appear to know how to get inside or they'd already be among us—"

"They know," Eroan said, dreading that it had come to this. "They have an elf. Nye Cadogan."

Alador stilled. "You know this for certain?"

"Yes."

"Then may Alumn's light be with him."

Eroan considered telling Alador the truth—that Nye had brought this on himself—but it was doubtful Nye would survive the bronze. The memory of Nye didn't need to be tarnished by his last actions. Jealousy and love had twisted him, but Nye *had* been good. He had the right to be remembered well, like all Order elves should be.

"We must assume they know everything he knows. How many elves are here, how to get inside, and what resistance they can expect."

"Then why haven't they attacked?" Venali asked.

Eroan had considered how best to explain the situation with Lysander during the trek over, but nothing had sounded right. There was no easy way to explain Dokul's infatuation with Lysander or how Eroan had come to know Lysander so well. "Dokul, the Bronze chief, wants Lysander, the

amethyst prince. Ashford is just a means by which he believes he can get what he wants.”

Both assassins frowned but it was Alador who said, “There is more to this?”

They already knew of how Eroan had escaped the tower with Lysander’s help, and how Eroan had come to be in possession of the ballista plans. But now he told the rest, as concisely as he could, leaving out much of the intimacies and intricacies of his relationship with Lysander. As far as Alador knew, Eroan had fashioned something of a bond with the prince, but little more.

“Where is this Lysander?”

“On his way with reinforcements.” Eroan hoped. No, he *believed*. Lysander would come. “We must hold out until then.”

“And he can be trusted, you’re sure of this?”

“Yes.”

Alador and Venali went on to explain how they had tunnels leading to ballista dotted about the Ashford hills, hidden among the gorse and thorns. Ashford was well defended, but in the face of so many dragons, they still wouldn’t be able to hold out long. Once the ballista locations were exposed, the dragons would take them out in minutes. And now they knew Ashford was below ground, the bronze would dig—it was what they knew.

“Use the ballista as your last line of defense. They’re powerful, but it’s shortlived. Once they fall, withdraw into here.” Eroan tapped a section on the carved map buried deep inside the hills. “It’s too deep for the dragons to dig out. They’ll be forced to shift and come at us through this thoroughfare.” He ran a finger along the main, narrow atrium. “We ambush them there.” A last stand. And it would be their last. There was no way out. Once the dragons came in, there would be no retreat.

“Let us hope it does not come to that.” Alador pointed to the far section of the map. “Bring your people in here during the night. There’s a doorway hidden among the rocks. Obviously, make sure you’re not seen. Once you’re inside, we’ll seal the tunnel behind you.”

Eroan nodded.

“Thank you,” Alador added. “For coming.”

“It’s my duty and the duty of all elves.”

Alador’s heavy gaze lingered, its weight telling. They’d be lucky to survive whatever came next. They were too few and the dragons too many.

Eroan was under no illusions. They needed a miracle. But until then, he'd have to be enough.

Alador looked out of the doorway into the atrium with its precious tree. "May Alumn's light protect us all."



EROAN RETURNED to the camp and relayed the plan for how they'd access Ashford at dawn.

Seraph waited until after he'd spoken and the Order had dissipated among the trees before asking the questions burning in her eyes.

"What distraction?"

That part he still had to work on. "You don't need to worry. I'll see it's done."

"I know you will, but the fact you won't tell me what it is has me concerned."

He walked on, heading to the rear of the camp, knowing she'd follow. "I miss the days you'd follow my orders without asking questions. Those were good days."

"Horse. Shit. I always asked questions. It used to annoy you to no end, that's why I did it. You'd waffle on about the importance of oiling your blade, blah blah blah, and I'd ask the same questions every time and you'd answer every time—I've no idea why, because you knew I was being a ferret, so I did it some more, to get a rise out of you. It didn't work as often as I'd hoped."

He stopped. "Horseshit?" And looked back.

She shrugged. "Lysander says it."

"Oh, Lysander says it, so that makes it right?"

She locked both hands on her hips. "He talks more sense than you do. Right now, he'd tell you to stop avoiding my question. What distraction? Are you going to do something stupid like turn yourself into dragon bait?"

He frowned, insulted by her apparent lack of faith in his tactics. But he kept his smile, the one he always seemed to wear around her. "When have I ever turned myself into *dragon bait*?"

An eyebrow arched. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Laughing, he shook his head. "I'm not the bait. You needn't worry. I'll be by your side when you enter Ashford."

"Then how, Eroan?" she whined. "Tell me, sassa. I need to know. How can I learn if you do not teach me?"

"I can again tell you all the benefits of oiling your blade. Would you like to hear them now or shall we leave that lesson for Ashford?"

"Oh, by Alumn, Lysander is so right. You're such a *tease*!"

He smiled. "Go. Help ready the camp. I'll tell you after it's done." Her lips twisted in frustration but she wouldn't question him again. A tease was he? Lysander and Seraph clearly encouraged one another. And Eroan wouldn't have it any other way.

He smiled to himself and roamed the camp, running his eye over preparations, answering questions, until the number of elves and humans fell away and the murmurs faded. He didn't have to go far into the quiet and the dark to find Akiem. The black prince blurred with the shadows, but Eroan could smell the lemony bite in the air, so similar to Lysander's and yet so different.

"I am to be your distraction," the prince said from his perch on a rocky mound, keeping his back to the camp and Eroan. Even with much of the camp's hustle and bustle between them, the dragon had heard his conversation.

Eroan came around to stand in front of him. Akiem lifted his head. He didn't look surprised so much as resigned. "I need you to do this. Only your reappearance will turn the dragons away from Ashford."

Akiem sent his gaze far into the forest. "Dokul doesn't want me. He wants Lysander."

"You got away. I know the chief well enough. He'll want you back."

His mouth turned down. "You don't know what you're asking."

It wasn't hard to recall how the bronze had manhandled Eroan or the vacant look in Akiem's eyes on his arrival and how that look had only now begun to fade. "You're wrong. I know exactly what I'm asking."

"I suppose you do." Akiem folded his arms, hugging himself closed. "I can still taste him. He's under my skin and everywhere. With you... here, among your people. It's been different, better. I even forget sometimes..." he turned his head, looking away, "what was done to me."

Eroan stood firm. "I'm not your sanctuary."

"You were for him. For Lysander."

“Because I love him.” Akiem laughed, the sound of it rumbled from his chest, setting Eroan’s teeth on edge. “You find that amusing?”

“No.” The laughter stuttered off and the dark returned to Akiem’s eyes. “There is no room in our world for love. I’m surprised there’s room in yours.”

Eroan crouched, leveling the prince under his glare. Akiem had never appeared so small, so normal. Not the dragon who had killed countless elves. Not the dragon who had ordered Eroan tortured. Just a man, afraid. “It ends here. Tomorrow, the next, I don’t know when exactly, but soon. It’s unlikely I’ll live through it. Hundreds will die. Dragon and elf. Just like you’ve killed hundreds of my kin. People I loved. Family. Is that what you wish your legacy to be, *prince*?”

Akiem’s straight black hair fell forward, hiding his face. He seemed younger behind his curtain of hair, like a young man behind a mask. “I didn’t want any of this. I was different once. Do you believe that?”

Why did it matter what Eroan thought if he was just an elf? “Lysander told me of Amalia and how you were different with her.” The prince flinched. “I believe you, but I’ll never forgive you. Lysander suffered all those years too, but he kept his heart.”

Akiem huffed a dry laugh. “You don’t know him because he doesn’t know himself. But when he discovers... Let me ask you this, elf.” Akiem’s eyes glowed golden. “How dangerous does a dragon have to be for its own vicious kin to turn on it?”

“Dragons do not need a reason to kill.”

Akiem shook his head, rippling his hair. “Not like this. Emeralds are not allowed to mature. The jeweled get stronger with every generation. We get *worse*. You have forgotten where he comes from. Lysander is Elisandra’s son.”

“So are you.”

“But there is one difference between us, one thing that changes everything. He is emerald.” Akiem gripped himself harder. “And all emeralds are the worst of us.” Looking up, his dark eyes widened. “I fear for you, elf. This love you cling to is a lie.”

Eroan straightened. “You will go to Dokul or I’ll kill you. Your choice is simple.”

“Either way, there is nothing left for me and I am dead.”

Anger flared through Eroan’s veins. “Just as you wished it.”

He left Akiem then, before giving in to the desire to run him through with the dragonblade. The prince would go to Dokul. Eroan had seen a different side of him. Since Dokul, since learning what Lysander had suffered, Akiem wanted more for his brother. He'd do this for Lysander, but not for himself.

Eroan pushed the prince's words to the back of his mind. Lysander was dangerous, he knew it. He'd known it since first seeing him in the tower dungeons, but Lysander was dangerous because he was different, and all dragons feared what they didn't understand.

Lysander would come.

And he'd bring a miracle with him.

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CHAPTER 22



N_{ye}

THE LEATHER COLLAR ITCHED, the skin beneath raw and filthy. He stank of sweat and leather and *them*. He'd known they were horrible, but he hadn't realized how loud they were, how big and brutish and everywhere. They reeked of dragon, naturally, but it was in him now, under his skin and inside his lungs. He couldn't breathe without tasting them, couldn't move without feeling them close by.

Nye would have killed for a bath.

They hadn't touched him, just like Dokul had agreed, but that didn't stop them from looking and leering and wanting. He hadn't slept, barely ate, and only did so when Dokul threatened to choke him with his *meat*. He'd tried too. The deal hadn't mentioned what Dokul could or couldn't do to him, so when the dragon chief had tugged on Nye's leather leash one morning, lust riding him hard, Nye had been forced to sweeten the deal.

He'd given the chief Ashford.

Since then, he'd begun to hope they'd kill him just so nobody would know he'd given up Ashford's existence. He hadn't wanted any of this. And now they were here, on the moorland leading down into Ashford's valley, waiting for Lysander, because Eroan would surely be here and where Eroan went, Lysander followed. Nye had told Dokul that too, although the chief had already realized the same.

It had been days.

The dragons were growing restless. And so was Dokul, always pulling on the end of Nye's leather leash, making him kneel, eyeing him like he was nothing more than a morsel to chew on.

"It is a shame you are not that Eroan Ilanea," Dokul grunted. "They'd trade Lysander for that Eroan elf, but not a worthless little thing like you."

Nye stayed silent. He'd learned to keep his words few unless Dokul explicitly wanted an answer.

Dragons tumbled through the dark skies above and screeched their calls across the land. Nye could only imagine how the Ashford elves were responding deep inside their hill. They'd prepare for attack. They'd fight—they wouldn't run. They'd fight and die.

"I need to know he's there." Dokul clicked his fingers and a dragon appeared. To Nye, they all looked the same, but this one Dokul favored. This one had been watching Nye since he'd almost raped him at the marsh. Kash. "I want to meet with their leader or chief or whatever the alpha elf is called. If this Eroan is inside, he has the arrogance to be among their leaders. Send an emissary. Let's rattle their cage and see who falls out."

Nye kept his head down, trying to be unseen. If he stayed small and quiet, Dokul often forgot he was present, but the humiliating leash always stayed within the chief's reach. Not being seen was both a blessing and a curse. Dokul and the bronze behaved like nothing Nye could have dreamed up in nightmares. He'd known what to expect, but at the same time, being told and seeing it were two very different things. They fucked and fought with equal fervor. There was no element of care or compassion about them. He'd witnessed one of their own be torn to shreds by five others for no reason, as far as Nye had been able to tell.

"You will come with me," Dokul said, yanking on Nye's leash. "Let them see how I treat elves."

Shame sweated through him. He could not be paraded in front of his people like this. They'd know it was him who had told the dragons.

Eroan survived this. So can I. It was his mantra. He whispered it like a prayer to Alumn. And with every second, minute, hour, and day, he waited for the moment to present itself. The moment he would escape.

Dokul was on his feet suddenly, squinting at the black skies.

Dragons churned above them, whipping up the darkness with wings and claws. It looked like the usual squawking nonsense until fire strafed the

belly of a huge black-scaled dragon, lighting him up from below.

It was surely Akiem.

Roars and howls split the night. Dokul stepped forward, hands fisted at his sides.

He'd left the end of the leash tied to a skinny ash tree.

Nye pulled his gaze back, careful to keep looking down, meager and weak. *Go*, he silently urged. *Go and forget me*.

The spicy, metallic smell of their wretched magic burned Nye's nose and tongue. Dokul was close to shifting, and if that happened, Nye would run. "It's Akiem, the black prince," Nye said. *Go on, go to him*.

Dokul's glare raked across his skin, sprinkling gooseflesh down his neck and arms. He shouldn't have spoken. All he'd done was remind Dokul he existed.

Whatever anger had driven Dokul to his feet faded right out of him. His lips carved a smile.

"You should go to him..." Nye tried desperately to hook the dragon back on the sight above, but he was turning, retrieving the leash. He wrapped it around his hand, reeling Nye closer.

"And what makes you think I'd listen to the twitterings of an elf?"

Nye pulled back on the leash, but the gesture was a token effort. They both knew he wasn't escaping.

"My flight will bring that prince to me." Dokul yanked, and Nye fell into the brute's sudden grip on his chin. His fingers bit into Nye's cheeks. "He returns because he has no choice." The grip eased. His rough thumb lifted and stroked. Dokul's hot, wet smell laced Nye's throat and sank deep into his empty stomach. "They all think they have choices..." Dokul turned Nye's head to the side. His teeth grazed Nye's neck. "I fucked their will out of them both. They belong to me... like you belong to me."

A small, stupid noise escaped Nye's throat, a prey noise. It triggered the chief. Dokul's free hand gripped Nye's hip, the one on his chin held firm. Dokul's teeth pinched his neck. Nye clenched his teeth and growled. The skin split, Dokul's teeth sinking in, and Nye stopped fighting, stopped everything. He'd stop breathing if he could. He wanted to die, here and now; let the monster kill him and have it over with. Better that than being fucked and torn apart from the inside out.

Dokul pulled his teeth free and dropped Nye at his feet. "Now you are marked for your elf kin to see. They will fear what it means to be *owned*."

Maybe they'll hand Eroan over..." The bronze tapped his fingers against his thigh. It was all Nye could see with his head bowed. "Now there's an idea. Why fight when we all know I'll win. Just hand over the pretty elf and the prince I want will follow."

"No," Nye muttered.

"What was that?"

"No." He looked up through his matted bangs. "You can't have him."

"You *dare* say no to me?" Dokul was on him again, his fat fingers thrust into the collar and pulling Nye against his heaving chest. Nye didn't care. He was done with this. He was dead anyway. Dead to the Order, dead to Eroan. Let this bastard lash out and kill him now.

Nye bared his teeth. "Eroan will kill you. You feel it, don't you? Alumn is watching. She guides him. Eroan Ilanea will be your end. Maybe the end of you all. He cannot be broken"—Nye's voice cracked—"not by you, not by anyone."

Dokul seethed, trembling, radiating heat and rage. But Nye's words found their mark. A laugh bubbled up and out of him like it had a mind of its own. Dokul flung him down, but Nye kept on laughing, curling up in the leaves and dirt and laughing until his face was wet and his stomach ached.



A LIGHT RAIN stirred the smell of summer and sunbaked earth off the ground. Nye lifted his face to the morning dampness, wishing it would clean the filth and shame from his skin. But no amount of rain could wash away the collar he wore, or the bite at his neck, or the line of dragons behind him, or the worst of them all, standing beside him, occasionally tugging on the leash as a reminder of what he was now.

A pet.

Not an elf. Not an Assassin of the Order. Not even Nye Cadogan. He belonged to the dragon. But as a pride of Ashford elves approached through the steaming mist—Alumn's sunlight already parting the clouds and gracing them with her blessing—Nye saw the sweet sight. Eroan to the left of Alador. He walked with purpose, dragonblade in hand, his lips a firm line and his eyes their typical, penetrating blue. He'd seen those eyes sparkle with lust; he'd felt the power beneath that body. How had it come to this?

Nye pinched his lips together, stifling a sob. There was no stopping the tears from blurring Eroan's approach.

He tipped his head back, banishing the tears before they could fall. The skies were clear of dragons—a condition of this meeting—and now the rain was easing, making way for what would be a beautiful day.

"My name is Alador. I speak for my people," the tall, imposing warrior said. Nye had met him briefly during his first and likely last visit to Ashford, alongside Eroan. "My companion is Eroan Ilanea."

"Oh, that one's reputation precedes him," Dokul replied, his attention drilled down on Eroan. "You look well, elf. Elisandra's chains agreed with you. Rumor is you even liked it." Dokul lifted a shoulder, his yellow-eyed gaze turning hungry. "Rumor is, you have acquired a taste for dragon cock too."

Eroan blinked long and lazily back at the chief. Nye wished he'd look over and see him, see the sorry in Nye's eyes. He hadn't wanted this. He wanted to blurt it out, to try and salvage some of his reputation even as he stood, shackled at the end of a leash. Shame made his stomach knot and roil.

"I'm assuming you've invited us to parlay to offer terms of a truce?" Alador prompted.

Dokul grinned. He spread his arms. "I can take your little hole in the ground and all your elves this very day if I wish it."

"Terms," Alador repeated, leaving no room for posturing.

"Is he here?" Dokul asked.

They stood silent a while with just the breeze hissing across the rough grass.

"No." A small tick tried to pull at Eroan's lips. Nye only knew to look for it because he'd seen the same so often when Eroan had tripped during training, or if his dagger had missed its mark. It was a rare sight, that tick, but it told a story.

The news didn't please Dokul either. "A deal then. I grow bored of watching your hill. So let's get this done. Give that one to me"—he nodded at Eroan—"and I'll leave you in peace."

"No," Alador said, barely waiting a breath.

Dokul puffed an aggrieved sound before turning that sound into a laugh. "He's just one elf." He circled a hand. "Hand him over and you save the hundreds you have tucked away belowground. Baby elflings, bitch elves

too. Come now, be reasonable. He can't be that impressive that you'd risk your entire brood for him."

Alador lifted his chin. "I remember you, Dokul. I was there when you lit the old-world on fire. I fought your hordes. You never did understand the force that stood against you. I see nothing has changed. You're as ignorant and shortsighted now as you were then."

Dokul cocked his head and worked his jaw, seeing the insult in those flowery words.

By Alumn. Nye blinked at Alador and then at Eroan beside him. They were brilliant, he realized. They were everything he'd wanted to be. He loved them, like he loved all his people. And he'd only ever wanted to do the right thing but somehow it had all gotten twisted up and broken. He saw that now. He should be right there beside them but somehow, he wasn't. Somehow, he was on the wrong side of all this and he didn't understand how that had happened. He'd only ever tried to do right.

Dokul pointed at Alador. "You can't tell me you're really going to condemn your people for the sake of one dragon-fucking elf."

Eroan stepped forward. Dokul flinched back.

Dokul. Flinched.

Nye had seen it. They'd all seen it.

A small, but no less lethal smile lifted one corner of Eroan's mouth. "Let me make something perfectly clear, Dokul." The use of the dragon's name drove his intent home like a blade through the heart. "There are no terms that elvenkind will agree to. We do not bargain with dragons. We kill them."

"You fuck them too, Eroan Ilanea. You've got balls, elf." Dokul laughed and the dragons behind him stirred. "Elisandra wasn't wrong when she—"

"I will kill you, Dokul," Eroan snapped. His composure cracked, falling away, but the anger beneath only made him seem more lethal. "There is nowhere in this world you can hide. I will hunt you down, stab a blade through your filthy heart and carve up your remains until there is nothing left for wolves but scale and tooth." He stepped back, nodded to Alador and turned away. "Sleep well, dragon."

Dokul swore. He clutched at Nye's leash, rattling Nye to his side. "I have this one! You know this one. He says you know him!"

Eroan stopped. Alador looked at Eroan and then cast his gaze back to Nye. The Higher Order assassin's knowledge-filled eyes brimmed with pity.

Nye's heart sank.

Eroan half-turned his head, the line of his jaw and the flutter of his lashes sharp with intent. "That is no elf." He strode on.

Nye's heart shattered. He tried to call out, to beg Eroan to save him, like he'd saved Lysander, but Dokul roared his frustration and tossed Nye to the ground.

The chief turned to his dragons. "Fill the skies with fire," he bellowed. "Burn it all. Find a way inside! *Kill every last wretched elf! Bring me Lysander!*"

Dragons took flight, so many that it felt like a storm had risen out of the ground. The leash yanked and Nye stumbled to his feet, lost and numbed, stumbling behind the beast and away from everything he loved.

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CHAPTER 23



Eroan

“I KNOW what you’re thinking, you wouldn’t be an elf if you weren’t,” Alador said. “But Dokul is a deceiver. He would have taken you in one breath and attacked Ashford in the next. They can never be trusted.”

Eroan followed Alador’s long strides down the narrow tunnel. The elder’s words echoed ahead. Of course Eroan had been thinking on Dokul’s offer to trade him for Ashford’s safety. But Alador was right. Dokul wasn’t leaving here without his fight and Lysander. Eroan could give him one of those things but not the other.

Carline had said eleven days.

Today was that day.

Lysander wasn’t here.

“His words... about being intimate with dragons...” The words tripped from Eroan’s tongue.

Alador waved a hand. “Nonsense. He’s good at that. Sticking words in like knives and twisting them.”

Not nonsense but this wasn’t the time to reveal Dokul had been right. “You speak as though you’ve dealt with him before?”

“I have. I was there when the humans tried to negotiate.” Alador’s shoulders lifted in a line. “Indeed, we all know how that turned out.”

Emerging from the tunnel mouth into Ashford's central foyer, Alador told the waiting elves to seal the tunnel behind them. Chloe had shared her black powder, which they'd put to good use by sealing all but a handful of tunnels in and out of Ashford. The elves manning the ballistae had their own pockets of gunpowder to seal the tunnels when they retreated. Eroan had watched Chloe hand out the fragile powder, knowing those elves would use it to seal them themselves and continue fighting *until it was done*.

By the time they reached the atrium, the explosion boomed through Ashford's foundations, shaking dust out of the upper levels, making it rain around the tree. The atrium was a weakness. The glass roof wouldn't hold back a dragon for long. Nobody said it, but they all knew the roof was a weak point, which was why Ashford's population was making for the deep, underground chamber, leaving the upper levels deserted.

The tree wouldn't last either. Alumn, everything they had worked for, salvaged and sculpted over the years. Eroan couldn't bear to think of it all being destroyed now. The books he'd read when Xena had brought him here. Such precious things. Pictures too, of the old-world, of long-dead people on sunny beaches and huge, red vehicles with dozens of windows, metal tubes that could fly like dragons. If those images were destroyed, the memories would be gone too. They were protecting more than elven lives here, they protected the past for the future, if they had one.

Alador's hand landed on Eroan's shoulder. "We will do our best. That is all we can ever do."

Eroan nodded, not trusting his voice.

Alador left his side to rally any lingering elves along, and Eroan headed for the choke point, finding Trey already there, standing by one of two smaller ballistae set on the overhanging walkway, angled downward, covered by blankets. These smaller versions reloaded much quicker. They'd be invaluable in holding the dragons back.

"Did you see him?" Trey asked. He reached around and rubbed the back of his neck as though to rub away an ache. "Nye?"

Eroan denied the memory any purchase: Nye beside Dokul. Collar around his neck. Teeth marks in his flesh. "I did and you do not want to know the rest."

A shadow darkened Trey's expression. "Have they... Was he hurt?"

Eroan knew what the collar around Nye's neck meant. The bite too. Dokul's mark. But there was little Trey could do for him. There was no use

in telling him the horror behind it all. “He appeared unharmed, at least physically.” That wouldn’t last. Eroan had deliberately avoided acknowledging Nye, but he’d seen the bruises, the haze in his eyes. Nye was strong, he was fast and lethal with a blade, but at the hands of dragons, he was just elf, and it wouldn’t be enough.

Trey sighed out his relief, but his gaze lingered too long on Eroan. “You think he deserves it.”

“No.” Yes. Trey saw the true answer on his face. “He burned Cheen’s tree. He drugged Lysander. He led the dragons here.” There was more too, but with each statement, Trey’s face fell. He cared for Nye in a way Eroan never could. “No, he doesn’t deserve this. Nobody deserves what he’s going through.”

Trey fell silent, chewing on his words, likely because they would come with a tremor. “Will we get him back?” he asked, voice pitched a little higher, clinging to hope.

Yes would be the easy answer, but it would also be a lie. “Alumn will decide his fate.”

Trey nodded and set to work adjusting the ballista, hiding his pain. Eroan watched the ex-messenger’s quick hands work, wondering if Nye knew he had someone who genuinely cared for him. If anyone could temper Nye, it was Trey, but it was likely too late for that.

Eroan placed a hand on Trey’s shoulder. The male looked up. Trey was a good soul, a good friend. Eroan sent a silent prayer out to Alumn to keep him safe. He squeezed his shoulder and moved off, not needing to speak. Sometimes a touch said the same as a thousand words.

Eroan walked the upper galleries, moving among his pride and those of Ashford’s Order, speaking the encouraging words they needed to hear.

Vines that had been allowed to climb the walls over the years would hide the prides until it was time to strike. With any luck, the dragons would walk right beneath them, never knowing they walked into an ambush.

Eroan leaned against the rail and watched his people, human and elf, ready their weapons and get to their positions below. With the dragons funneled into this point, forced into their human form by the confines of the walls, it might just be enough. Most of the bronze were slow. The jeweled would be more difficult to take down, but each elf here had trained their entire life to do exactly that. They had the weapons and the experience. For the first time in centuries, they had a chance.

He'd never been prouder of who he was and at the same time more disgusted by the actions of someone he'd considered a friend. To see Nye in the collar... Eroan rubbed at his neck, feeling its weight still, hearing the queen's laughter. With the memory came the hot, wet stench of dragon, lacing his throat and turning his stomach over.

"Eroan...?"

Eroan flinched. The sandy-haired elf beside him was as lean as a reed. Lost to the past, Eroan almost didn't recognize him.

"Ross." He straightened, facing the male while shoving the harrowing memories aside. The hunter wore Order leathers instead of his more blended hunter attire. The fit didn't sit right. The sleeves were too long, jacket too loose. The items were likely borrowed. And from the way Ross shifted on his feet, he wasn't comfortable in them. They'd barely spoken more than a few words since Eroan had returned alive to Cheen. Seraph had been the one to convince Ross to allow Eroan to *borrow* the hawk, helping him get message to Lysander. The hawk had returned to its falconer but wasn't with him now. Ross seemed diminished without it. "Where's your hawk?"

He cleared his throat, propped a hand on a hip, and then dropped it again. "I let her go." He reached for the rail and squeezed his grip around it.

Eroan wondered if that iron grip was meant for Eroan's throat.

If he'd freed the hawk, then he didn't believe he was going to live through the next few days.

"I wanted to speak with you before... before it happens." The hunter went on, speaking while looking out over the foyer, avoiding Eroan's direct gaze. "Get some things cleared between us."

Eroan waved him off. "There's no ne—"

"Will you allow me to speak?" Ross asked, his tone making it clear this wasn't a request. "Or are you too important to hear me?"

Now the hunter's gaze snared Eroan's and locked on.

So the male did have a backbone after all. Eroan nodded.

"I love Janna." Ross's moss-green eyes burned, daring Eroan to challenge the words.

He would have, once. Janna was his friend. His best friend since he'd walked out of the forest as an orphan and she'd taken his hand, showing him another home. Nobody was good enough for Janna. Eroan leaned a hip against the rail, biting his words back.

“After you... She was stricken when she thought you’d perished in the tower, and then in France. It broke her heart. She loves you. Of course, you know that...” Ross scoffed, like such a thing were impossible. Eroan raised an eyebrow. “We did all right together. We *do* all right. She told me... about the babe. About you being the father.”

Eroan looked down at the gallery floor but saw the memory of the babe in her mother’s arms back in Cheen, not the elves moving about below. Father. What a word that was. So much responsibility came with it, a responsibility he wasn’t capable of. But Ross was.

“Her name is Elle.” Ross’s mouth tilted. “She has your eyes.”

Elle. Eroan gritted his teeth. Pain thumped through his jaw. The rest of him ached too, but mostly right around his heart.

“Janna says it’s better this way. That you don’t want her—”

What? Eroan looked up.

Ross held up a hand, stopping what would have been a string of denials. “If you do right by her, I’ll step aside. You love her and Elle is yours. I have no right to get in the way of that.” He lowered his hand and some of the fight drained out of Eroan. “I wanted to tell you now, so there’s no bad blood between us should anything... happen. I don’t want to be the one standing in the way of love. That’s not who I am.” Ross winced. “I’m prepared to let them both go, because Janna loves you and Elle has a right to grow with her real father.”

Eroan had a million things he wanted to say, a thousand feelings running through him. He gripped Ross’s shoulder and held him there, looking the male in the eyes. “There’s nothing to stand in the way of. Love her, like I can’t.”

The male blinked too quickly. He nodded tightly, trying to hide how the words opened him up. Like Janna, he was useless at hiding his thoughts from his face.

“You’ll return safely to Janna and Elle.” Eroan released him, giving him a small shove. “You have my word.”

Ross backed up, dragging a hand across his face, wiping off the emotion. “Until it is done.” He turned away.

Eroan closed his eyes and sighed out the pain. He had no right to feel anything, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. He had a daughter. Her name was Elle. He was glad to learn of her name in these moments—moments

that could very well be his last. Perhaps Ross had accosted him for that too. He silently thanked the falconer for the unexpected gift.

He'd been right to free the hawk. Only Alumn knew what happened next.

A boom shook the ceiling. Chunks of plaster cracked free and plummeted toward the elves below. "Move!" People scattered. Ancient concrete exploded around them. And somewhere above, through earth and rock, a dragon roared.

It had begun.



THEY DUG FROM ABOVE.

Eroan ran to the atrium. The tree's branches shivered with every booming roar. Leaves rained, the tree weeping its tears. A resounding brittle sound snapped through the vast space, like that of wrongness and of dry thunder. A shadow blocked light pouring in through the glass ceiling. The sound snapped and snicked again. A jagged, jerking crack twitched across the glass ceiling. Through the haze, dragon eyes glowed, dark pupils expanding then narrowing as it realized the prize it had found.

"To your places!" Eroan yelled, scattering the last few remaining Order elves to their posts.

More cracks sounded.

The dragon rumbled, shifting its weight. Huge claws scored the glass. It tilted its head, peering inside with one, huge eye.

The glass roof gave a shuddering groan, hitched, then exploded inward. The dragon was suddenly inside and everywhere, screeching, clawing, wings snagging on metal girders. It tumbled, snagged in the tree for a moment before the mighty ancient branches snapped under its weight and the dragon thumped to the ground in a mangled heap, branches, glass and leaves raining over it.

On the gallery level, one level above the dragon, Eroan slowly backed away from the chaos.

The jeweled—an amethyst with scales like velvet purple—shook glass from its crown and neck. It snapped its jaws around the tree's dangling branches, tearing wooden limbs off, lashing out. Eventually, it righted itself

and snuffled the air, parting its jaws to take the scent onto its tongue. Jeweled dragon eyes sharpened.

The beast lifted its head and barked. Once. Twice.

A bronze landed beside the gaping hole and thrust its head inside. Another screeched behind it.

This was it then. Battle was inevitable. But here, in these closed tunnels, the Order had the upper hand.

Eroan merged with the shadows and retreated back to the choke point. Behind him, more dragoncalls joined the first until the air trembled with their noise. Then the calls all stopped. Quiet filled a breathless moment. Eroan crouched beside an elf manning the camouflaged ballista. The male's eyes were cold, ruthless, like all of the Order.

Eroan tasted citrus and felt dragon magic trail its fingers down his spine. They were shifting.

"I smell them," a deep female voice said, her words echoing. "Root them out. Search every hole and passage. Open the tunnels from this side." Boots thundered now in place of the earlier barks and roars. "*WE'RE HERE FOR YOU, LITTLE ELVES!*"

An earsplitting dragon shriek cut through Eroan's skull.

She'd shifted back into dragon.

Eroan rested a hand on the ballista's frame and inched forward to see through the balustrade. The amethyst slunk ahead of the countless dragonkin-humans swarming behind her, lifting her head to see above the ground floor level, exposing the glowing firepit low in her throat.

Closer, she came, sweeping her gaze about her, taking in the rippling vines and gnarled roots dangling from the ceiling and walls.

Eroan waited until she'd turned her head away and then carefully, slowly, angled the ballista toward where she would soon be. Inch by inch, he adjusted the aim, keeping low and concealed behind the camouflage blankets.

Closer still.

A growl rumbled low in her chest, keen senses warning her. The jeweled were more cautious. He'd hoped for a bronze to be the first to fall and block the others' paths.

The ballista needed more adjusting. They'd aimed it in the center, not to the right, from where she came now. A mistake, but it was too late to fix. He just had to inch it around, bit by bit.

Her head jerked up. Eyes fixing on his location. Massive black pupils expanded and then narrowed to slits. Fire glowed behind her scales. Her top lip quivered, rippling over teeth like the one strapped to Eroan's back.

She knew.

Eroan tore the camouflage blanket free in a flurry of movement.

The beast breathed in.

He gripped the ballista handles.

She opened her jaws.

He aimed the heavy dragontooth-tipped arrow at her neck. Fire clawed up her throat and glowed behind her tongue.

He fired.

The arrow sailed free, fast and sharp and slammed into her firepit, releasing a gush of liquid flame. Fire poured, running like blood. She screamed or howled or whatever sound it was that scorched Eroan's soul and then lunged for his position. But she never made it. Suffocating on flame, she stumbled and slumped, coughing up molten mucus. She fell hard, rocking Ashford's foundations.

There was a moment of quiet, a small moment between breaths. Then the dragonkin roared and poured forth in a wave of rage and bloodlust, spilling over their fallen one. "Open fire!" Eroan yelled.

Arrows pitched into the gully between levels, striking the dragons down. They stumbled and tipped, falling to their knees, clutching at the elven arrows punched into their human skins. Eroan watched them fall like toys, each one toppling in front of the next.

They had them.

The first wave fell silent. No more dragons came. A few more arrows finished those that groaned and bled and the quiet was back. But it wouldn't last.

That had just been the beginning, the dragons knew where they were now, and they would all come.

"Hold!" Eroan called, then crouched back behind the ballista, nodding at the weapon's operator, handing back control.

The quiet was the worst of it. The waiting. He wiped sweat from his face and listened.

His heart thumped.

A roar. Another. Closer.

Many.

So many thunderous roars and wing beats.

He swallowed.

This time, they spilled in from the side chambers, not the roof. They'd found the tunnels. And now the way inside was exposed for them all. They came like a wave of pure madness, their eyes wide, still roaring in human form.

"Fire!" Eroan boomed.

Arrows sailed.

He pulled his blade free and eyed the dragonkin charging down the gallery, the lust for the kill shining in their eyes. He swirled the sword and started forward. He always had preferred facing death this way, head-on, with a blade in his hand. He screamed his rage and on cue, the hidden army of elves exploded from their hiding places, raining down on dragons.

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CHAPTER 24



Lysander

THE LADDER of muscles keeping his wings spread *burned*. That same burn radiated down his spine, throbbing a warning. Stop flying. Rest. He'd be no good to anyone if he couldn't keep his head up in battle. But he couldn't stop. Couldn't rest. His flight fanned out behind him, their colors shining beneath sun and moonlight. He'd lost some, their strings in his mind snipping off and falling away. The metals he'd forced to submit weren't accustomed to long-distance flying. He let them fall, not caring that some shattered against the coastal rocks instead of making land.

The eastern coast zigged and zagged beneath him. Salt crusted his scales, making them grind, but the ocean thermals helped keep him and his flight aloft. On and on, relentlessly pushing forward.

The hunger never left. Like the ache, it thudded in his chest, needing, wanting, lusting for the battle ahead. With every new dragon he'd forced to submit beneath his gaze, every new mind he'd tied to his, the hunger grew and so did the power blazing through his heart. More. He needed more. Own, take, bite, fuck. He was a creature driven by vengeance on a world that had wronged him. He salivated at the thought of striking back. Driven. Focused. Relentless.

He knew Ashford was east of Cheen, between Eroan's home and the sea, so that was where he headed, wings beating, the wind lifting him up

where the air was thin but the sun warm.

Finally, on the horizon, a black storm of dragons boiled the sky.

Lysander banked, his belly whooshing and wings aching. Behind him, the dragons followed. He didn't need to look to know, they were each a part of him, tied to him in some inexplicable way. Rhadgar hadn't mentioned that—how he touched each of their minds and they touched his. A small part of Lysander feared it. The old part, the broken prince, but he was king now and the bronze were about to discover exactly what an emerald could do.

The metallic brown beasts flocked above a barren moorland, screeching at the sight below. More dragons, digging, spilling through a hole in the ground and out of sight.

They did not see his flight. And if they did, they mistakenly assumed Lysander's dragons were theirs.

They were unaware and unprepared. Lysander bared his teeth and dove.

Midair, he slammed into the first, claws grasping its back while his teeth vised around its skull. The bronze screamed and tumbled over, rolling. Lysander locked his jaw and the bronze's skull shattered. The dead bronze tumbled from his grip.

Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.

He didn't need to order his flight to attack. A thought, a need, they were connected to him, a part of him. They plunged in, dragon against dragon, clashing in the skies. Jeweled and bronze against jeweled and bronze. Color and blood, claw and teeth. And the screaming. The screaming was bliss. The bronze were strong but the jeweled were vicious. Outnumbered, outstrengthened, and surprised. If it were just numbers, Lysander would fail, but he saw the heaviest, the strongest, and hunted them down, pinning them under his gaze. The first quickly succumbed, their minds weak, confused, easily hooked in, and with a glance, Lysander turned them against their own. His flight gained, growing in number, becoming ever stronger. Like *he* was becoming stronger.

This was power.

This was right.

This was everything he'd been denied his entire life. He had them now. And those that refused to bow were set upon, tearing, clawing, raining blood upon the land until the ground darkened with it.

Broken no more.

Lysander spiraled above the slaughter, watching, controlling, commanding. Bronze blood ran from his jaws. His claws dripped with flesh and shattered scale. More. It wasn't enough. They would all be his. Or die beneath him.

But one was missing. The biggest of all.

Lysander dove lower, streaking between slashing claws and flaring wings.

Dragons still poured into the hole in the ground, either oblivious to the attack above them or uncaring.

He smelled them then: pine and cut wood. Home. Eroan.

The elves.

A new string plucked on Lysander's dragon heart. Different from the others, it knotted in his mind. He tipped his wing, cutting a *U* in the air, coming back around toward the dragon-infested moorland and its gaping chasm.

A dragon hit him in the side, crushing wing and ribs. He rolled, curling in, knowing what was coming. The ground rushed up. He hit hard, shuddering bone and body. Rock and earth and pain pummeled his back and side. Bronze scales flashed. But not Dokul. Just another mind to own, take, bite, fuck.

Lysander speared it with his gaze. The bronze tore his head away and roared.

Others veered toward them, breaking off from the airborne battle.

Lysander rose from the crater his impact had gouged out and stalked forward, trying to trap the beast's gaze under his own. It tossed its head, backed up, snapped and snarled, and refused to succumb. But it would. Lysander jerked his head upward, caught the glance of the incoming dragon on the right and yanked. The beast screeched and scrambled in-flight, shocked out of its smooth dive. Its mind was a fragile thing. Lysander snagged it, and instead of falling on Lysander, it hit the back of the stubborn one, crushing it beneath its weight. They snapped their jaws at one another, teeth tearing off scale.

Lysander owned a third and had it rush in and tear out the stubborn one's throat. He smiled, bearing blood-soaked teeth, and sent the two new bronze back into the skies to rip the heart of their own brood.

Own.

Take.

Bite.

Fuck.

It beat like a drum through the hearts of them all.

Stretching his wings, he fanned them outward, trying for lift, but their ache had grown worse, and lust for the slaughter alone couldn't sustain him, his wings—weakened by lack of use and extended flight—didn't have the strength to lift him again. Didn't matter. Those that had fallen, wings broken, he killed them, useless as they were, while scanning the blood-soaked earth for the biggest beast.

But Dokul wasn't here.

He should be here.

In the hole, perhaps?

Lysander dashed for the exposed hole in the earth, snatching a wing flung his way and ripping the bronze out of his path. So many. They wanted whatever was buried inside.

Pine.

Cut wood.

Elf.

Eroan.

Lysander's heart stuttered.

Ashford.

He was here for them, wasn't he? That was why he'd come. He had almost forgotten.

Carline had said something... He snarled that memory away. Carline was dead. They'd all be dead.

He turned on the bronze and roared out his rage. They'd hurt him. They'd kept him, buried him, made him weak. The one he wanted wasn't here, but it didn't matter. Every single dragon who flew against him would die—jeweled or Metal, he didn't care. Above, his vast flight circled down, trapping the bronze in the center of their storm of wings.

He watched the carnage and bloodletting, knowing this was how the world changed.

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CHAPTER 25



N_{ye}

DOKUL’S human form shimmered and warped, as though the beast inside were trying to crawl out from under his skin. Nye shrank back from the chief and from the hell in the skies. He’d expected Dokul to shift, to take flight, but that hadn’t happened. He’d hung back with a select few of his closest kin—including the newly re-emerged black prince—and he’d watched. He’d watched the green dragon come in and *destroy*. But it wasn’t just the killing that had Dokul rooted, it had to be how his own dragons turned on one another, as though a ripple had passed through them, turning them all mad with rage.

Dokul growled, the sound far from his human appearance. “Retreat,” he spat through his gritted teeth. “RETREAT!”

A nearby bronze as dragon roared what must have been the command to pull back. The command sailed on the voice of more dragons. The ones over Ashford, locked inside a tornado of jeweled, they were lost. Even Nye could see that.

Dokul turned on him. He yanked on Nye’s leash, pulling him in close. “Lysander believes himself a king.”

Did that mean the emerald tearing apart Dokul’s forces was Lysander? But his wing... Nye glanced anew at the bleeding dragons raining from the sky. He’d been right. Lysander truly was a nightmare.

Akiem caught his eye and held it. Something seemed to pass between them, some weighted knowing, but Dokul's smile soon lured Nye's attention back. His yellow eyes filled with flame. "We both know Lysander's weakness, don't we, little elf."

Eroan.

"Come," Dokul ordered, waving his flight away from the battlefield and dragging Nye alongside him. "The game has changed but it is far from over."

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CHAPTER 26



Eroan

EROAN BECAME THE BLADE: its point his vengeance, its edge, his honor. He killed mercilessly. And he wasn't alone. Assassins of the Order cut the dragons down. Arrows flew. The choke point brimmed with the dead. The stench of blood and sweat and shit and dragon laced the air. Thoughtless, Eroan killed, until there was nothing left to whet his blade with. He scanned the scene below, wiping his vision clear, and saw three dragonkin rounding on an elf, his arrows of no use in close combat.

Ross.

Eroan grabbed a vine with his left hand, wrapping it around his forearm, and ran for the edge of the first-floor landing. He leaped, quickly falling, air rushing by, until the vine snapped tight, swinging him inward, toward the three dragons. A slash to the back of the knees took the first down, startling the remaining pair. Eroan released the vine and dropped into a crouch. Magic bubbled around them all, so thick it was almost blinding. He stabbed his blade through the chest of the dragon he'd incapacitated, striking the heart before he could shift. The magic thinned, allowing Eroan to breathe again. The other two would be thinking about shifting. But to do that, they needed time. Seconds. Seconds they didn't have.

Ross's arrow plunged through the back of one, jerking him on the spot, and Eroan sprang, launching off his back foot. The dragon whirled, tried to

scramble over the dead, his magic unfurling, but coming to his aid too late. Eroan brought the blade down deep into the dragonkin's spine, making the creature screech. The second swing took his head.

And it was done.

Eroan stood among the devastation, breathing hard, scanning for any movement that didn't belong to elf or human. His pride came forward, toeing and prodding the bodies. Some of the fallen received final, vicious slashes to their throats. None survived.

"Thank you." Ross offered his hand.

Eroan took it and pulled the male into a quick embrace. Hunters and their arrows. "Get yourself a blade, eh?"

Ross mustered a hint of a smile before his attention drifted back to the dead. It was different, killing in battle, not just for food. For Janna's sake, Eroan hoped it didn't change Ross.

Ashford's tree had survived, although it was painted with blood and had lost one entire side of branches. But it lived; Eroan could feel its life all around as he approached its enormous trunk. Light spilled in from above, illuminating the dead.

They'd done it.

He looked up into the sunlight. Warmth baked blood dry on his face.

The sky outside was clear of dragons.

Order assassins joined him, regarding the tree, the silent dead, and the sky.

Eroan wet his lips, tasting blood. He wanted more, because none among the bodies was Dokul.

"To the surface..." he urged, voice gruff. "It may not be over."

Eroan emerged from a side-tunnel and drifted forward. Thick, baked grass crunched under his boots. The land around them smoked and bled. Fire sizzled and snapped among mounds upon mounds of dead dragons.

The Order hadn't done this. The fighting had been inside, not out here.

"It's not over," an assassin voiced, shielding her eyes and squinting into the distance.

Dragons speckled the distant sky.

They'd withdrawn.

Why?

"What happened here?" the assassin murmured, wandering forward.

Eroan had no answer. The first dragon he came upon had spilled its insides over the ground. The next had its neck bent at a devastating angle. The skull of the next had been crushed. On and on it went. They'd turned on one another, slain and shredded their own kin as though overcome with some kind of madness.

Inside Ashford had been only half the battle.

Another had raged above ground. Dragon against dragon.

A long, warning screech sailed over the killing grounds.

Sunlight licked over the emerald's scales, tarnished red by blood. It soared, circling high above, then spiraled downward before leveling out and gliding toward them. The wingspan was vast. Its scales shone like waters from a lagoon. Alumn, it was magnificent.

"Incoming!" someone yelled. "*Get to your posts.*"

Eroan's heart raced. Emerald. He moved forward, his pace increasing. The dragon grew larger.

"It's him." Seraph tracked alongside him, her face tilted upward. "It's Lysander, I know it." She raced ahead.

It was.

Eroan would know him anywhere, buried under blood or soaring above it. His broken crown of bone confirmed it. Lysander.

He'd done this. He'd come. He'd attacked from above. He'd stopped countless dragons.

And Eroan had never seen a more wondrous sight. He broke into a run, chasing Seraph's light-footed sprint.

A spark glinted in the air between the ground and Lysander's approach.

"No!" Seraph screamed.

A ballista lance arched high, briefly catching the sunlight.

Eroan stumbled.

The lance punched into Lysander's chest, jerking him out of the soar like someone had yanked on an invisible chain. He roared. His wings flared then wrapped in as though to cocoon around himself.

And he fell.

It happened slowly, stretching on in painful detail. He fell, clutching at the lance, claws scrabbling to yank it free but unable to find purchase.

Another lance launched into the air.

"Hold!" Eroan whirled and thrust out a hand to the Order elves behind him. "*Stop! Don't fire!*" The last command lodged in his throat.

When he turned back, the second lance had missed its target, but Lysander still fell, and behind him, hundreds of dragons turned as one great wave, all sweeping toward Ashford.

No, no, no... What had they done?

Another lance flew.

Eroan sprinted forward, chasing Seraph's path through the dead dragons. He heard the boom when Lysander fell, felt the ground shift.

He'd come, he'd won for them, and now this.

Eroan shut those thoughts down, damming the emotion behind them. Nothing mattered more in this moment than reaching Lysander.

They came upon him, snapping and clawing at the wooden shaft sticking out from low in his throat, above his chest, a few inches from the firepit. Had it hit its target, Lysander would have been dead before he hit the ground.

Seraph stumbled in.

"Don't!" Eroan grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

She tugged and fought. "We have to get it out! He can't shift!"

Lysander thrashed and roared, stirring up great clouds of dust and ash. His eyes rolled and burned and flashed. Wild with pain, he'd lash out. He'd hurt her.

"Damn it, Eroan!" Seraph tore herself free. "The dragons are coming! They're coming because we shot him down. We have to make this right or they'll kill us all."

He knew that, but she hadn't seen the raw wildness in Lysander's eyes. "I'll do it."

She fought to go ahead and Eroan pulled her around, shoving her back. "Seraph, look in his eyes." She did and gasped. "He's not himself. Get back and stay back. If I fail... If I fail, retreat inside Ashford."

Seraph hung back and gave him an accepting nod. She wouldn't rush in, but she wouldn't leave either.

Eroan turned and faced the thrashing beast, careful to watch for the swing of Lysander's powerful, spiked tail. He lifted his hands and crossed them, drawing Lysander's eye. "See me..."

Nothing.

Lysander growled and clawed at his chest, snapping his teeth near the end of the shaft but unable to pinch it free. There was nothing in his green eyes but the single-minded focus to pull the lance free.

A cloud loomed above. Eroan dared not look but knew exactly what that cloud was made of. If he couldn't bring Lysander around, those dragons would fall upon Ashford and more lives would be lost.

"Lysander!" He waved his arms. "Damn you, prince! See me!"

The dragon's thrashing stalled. His huge head swung in, stopping inches from Eroan's chest. The sudden weight of all Lysander's attention swayed Eroan on his feet. The whole world became Lysander. Blood drooled from his jaws. His eyes flared, bright like no green found in nature. Betrayal shone there, too, and Eroan's heart ached to see it. Tears leaked from the dragon's eyes.

"See me..."

The dragon growled its low threat.

"Seraph..." Eroan called, never taking his eyes off Lysander's. He gently pressed a hand on the warm, dry scales latticing along Lysander's nose like he had done once before. Lysander didn't move. Eroan spread his fingers over the smaller scales. "Take it out." Still, he held Lysander's gaze. It felt like something strummed between them, an understanding, or maybe something more, something deeper than that, something soulbound. Lysander knew him, but if he looked away, it would break.

"This is gonna hurt, big guy," Seraph mumbled. She must have pulled on the lance, because Lysander thrust his head skyward and howled.

Eroan staggered, but stood tall, suddenly feeling small, just as Seraph had said. Seraph scrambled backward, leaving the lance in the dirt between her and Lysander.

Lysander righted himself, panting hard. Blood oozed from the wound, but it would heal, wouldn't it? He seemed to regard Eroan carefully, as though not fully seeing. Seraph too. He sniffed at the lance. His top lip peeled back in a silent snarl.

"Does he... does he know us?" Seraph's hand slipped into Eroan's.

He couldn't answer. This dragon, it was Lysander, but it wasn't. There was a wildness in him Eroan had seen before, but not to this extent.

The dragon blinked, pulled his gaze away, and barked at the sky. The swarm of jeweled and bronze immediately altered their path, veering back, heading north. Lysander turned and limped in the same direction.

It wasn't safe for him here.

Eroan knew this was the only way, but it tore him open.

This wasn't right.

Again, Lysander had suffered.

“Wait...” Seraph pulled Eroan back around as he withdrew, heading toward Ashford. “Wait. Where are you going? He needs us.”

Eroan’s gaze flicked to the dragons flying away and back down to Seraph’s open, tear-streaked face. “He doesn’t need us, he needs them.”

She hiccupped a sob. “No, he saved us, and we did this, and he needs to know it wasn’t us. We can’t leave him!”

He grabbed her shoulders. “I’m not leaving him!” Shocked, she turned to stone beneath his grip and the dam inside him broke open. He pulled her close instead of shoving her away, pulled her into his arms and squeezed. By Alumn, he couldn’t stand this. He needed her. “Help me go back to Ashford and not say the things I want to say,” he whispered. “Help me get through this day and we’ll find him. I promise.”

Her little hand locked in his shirt and twisted. “He didn’t know us, did he?”

“He knew us, he just...” He eased her back and thumbed tears from her cheeks. “He is dragon.”

She sniffed and nodded, prompting more tears to fall.

He looped an arm around her shoulders and walked with her among the dragon carcasses. Distantly, dragoncalls faded away, and with them, went a piece of Eroan’s heart.



IF SERAPH HADN’T BEEN with him, he’d have said or done something that would have gotten him thrown out of Ashford, the Order, and probably executed anew. Days and nights bled into one another as the dragon bodies were taken to the surface to be burned alongside the huge carcasses. Dragons, once dead, were flammable enough, although the stench was so bad, they had to wait until the wind blew eastward, out to sea. Eroan spoke little, setting his mind to the task of clearing and fixing, but no elf could continue without rest and that’s when the doubt and anger and frustration crept back in. Not helped by the Order assassins swapping stories of how they’d deterred the last wave by striking down the formidable emerald.

What he hadn’t told Seraph, or anyone, was how Lysander had looked through him, not with heartfelt meaning, but with malice. He didn’t fear

him, not yet. There was more to it. He needed to know what had happened in the north. Clearly, Lysander's wing had healed, but that was not all. He'd returned changed and that thought did not sit well with Eroan.

"You okay?"

Seraph had crept into his room. He'd waited for her to speak, not inclined to move where he lay atop the bedsheets, but she'd stayed silent, and they'd fallen into that quiet, neither needing to talk, both sharing the same thoughts.

"They almost killed him," Eroan finally said. He rolled onto his side and propped his head on a hand. Seraph stood, leaning against the wall by the door. She'd left her hair loose and discarded her jacket somewhere. But she wore her blade. Always. "He thinks I ordered it."

She shook her head. "No. He would never think that."

But Eroan had seen it in his eyes.

"They laugh about the victory, Seraph. They don't even know he was here, that he stopped the horde. They think the dragons just killed each other, because they're dragon." He planted his boots on the floor and rested his elbows on his knees, rubbing his hands together, and when that didn't alleviate his rattling nerves, he ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it all back and wringing it through a fist. "We almost killed him."

She had nothing to say because there was nothing to say.

"It will always be like this," he said softly.

"No. We have to hope that we can change things. It's just going to take time."

He smiled at her hope, wishing it was his too. It had been, once. But he'd been a fool to think he and Lysander could have any kind of future. It wasn't possible, not in this world. "And if they change for worse?"

A knock rapped on his door, interrupting before Seraph could answer.

"Come."

The sentinel who entered was one Eroan recognized from the battle but couldn't recall his name. "There's a dragon at the door, says his name is Lysander, requesting to see you. We tried to restrain him—"

Eroan was up and moving. He shoved past him, out into the hall. Seraph followed but only after saying, "Don't ever try to restrain him."

The walk to Ashford's surface had never taken so long.

And there Lysander was, standing right outside the Ashford tunnel doors, eight Ashford assassins around him, poised to kill. He leaned to one

side, hip cocked, arms crossed, a playful smile on his lips, and his own style of delight shining in his eyes. His hair was a wild mess, tumbling over his shoulders, and the clothes were a strange mix of brown elven leathers and a filthy cotton shirt, gaping at the neck like he'd missed a lace-hole somewhere.

Fuck the elves.

Fuck the Order.

Eroan shoved through the assassins and threw his arms around his dragon, pulling him close, breathing him in. He smelled like smoke and blood and grit and male and it was all Eroan could do not to purr. Tension locked the man rigid inside Eroan's embrace, but just as quickly as Eroan had attacked, Lysander's muscles thawed. Warm breath fluttered against Eroan's neck.

The dragon closed his arms around him and molded him close. "I thought for a moment you were going to stab me."

The soft, quiet words stroked Eroan's throat, intimate, like a long kiss. Eroan considered replying, but words required thought and his thoughts had yet to reorganize themselves into anything coherent.

"What by Alumn are you all gawking at?" Seraph's sharp bark delivered a startling amount of authority. "There are bodies to burn, you know." She clapped her hands together. "C'mon bitches, off with you."

Eroan peeled himself from Lysander and arched an eyebrow at Seraph's grinning face. The assassins had withdrawn, although a few lingered, curious and wary.

"She gets it from you." Eroan let his fingers slip from Lysander's, missing his touch already.

Lysander's soft laugh unfurled, encasing Eroan's heart in warmth. He was here. There was so much to say and explain, and then there was Ashford and the elves and Alador, and Lysander would not be welcome among them, and this couldn't last, but by Alumn, none of that mattered.

"Dokul wasn't among them." Lysander tucked his hands into his pockets. "We searched. He's gone to ground."

"He has Akiem," Eroan said, and added, formally, "Your brother was instrumental in keeping my prides safe."

Lysander nodded, absorbing the information. He eyed the door into Ashford. "I won't ask to go in."

“That shot was a mistake,” Eroan began, but Lysander’s glance cut him off.

“We both know it wasn’t.” The breeze teased through his hair and light caught in his eyes. “Your elves can rest well. Dokul’s numbers are down to a handful. He won’t return. With any luck, you’ll never see him again.” The flutter in Lysander’s cheek belied that last comment. He very much wanted to see Dokul; as did Eroan, at the point of his blade.

“I’ll tell Alador,” Seraph suggested.

“And *your* dragons?” Eroan asked. The dragons that had swept in after Lysander fell were too coordinated to be acting on their own. They had all belonged to Lysander. That much was clear.

His dark lashes lowered but his look lifted through them, turning the gaze provocative. “A short ways north. They won’t attack—unless I’m shot at again.”

There was a great deal different about him, but it wasn’t an outward change. Something inside of him had shifted. Eroan couldn’t place it. He wanted to reacquaint himself with the man—the dragon—he’d come to love, to discover this new version of Lysander. It reminded him of the young prince he’d crossed swords with outside the queen’s door. The prince had been ruthless, driven, focused. Lethal.

Eroan realized he’d been staring too long and that both of them appeared to be waiting for him to say something, but what?

Lysander’s always-shifting smile was back. “Is there somewhere we can go to talk?”

The door back into Ashford had never seemed more foreboding. They couldn’t go inside but there was nowhere else. Just a battlefield peppered with pyres.

“There’s a hut to the east, near the top of the cliffs,” Seraph said. “You can see the sea through its windows.”

Eroan blinked at her, noticing a touch of color finding her cheeks. “And how would you know?”

“Oh, you know. Someone took me there the last time we were here.” The dash of pink grew.

“Someone who?”

“His name’s Junoe. He plays the guitar. And other things.”

Eroan frowned. She wasn’t old enough for dalliances with music-makers. Or anyone.

Seraph chuckled and headed back toward Ashford's entrance, waving back over her shoulder. "I'll cover for you."

Lysander had observed all this without saying a word. "The hut?" Eroan asked.

"After you."

They were observed crossing the moorland. Word would soon reach the Order. Remarkably, Eroan found he couldn't care less. Ashford was safe. He owed his people nothing more.

The stone hut sat hunched near a cliff's edge. Its roof had been recently thatched so it blended with the landscape. Pushing inside, he spotted kindling lying inside the small stove. A kettle and pans waited on the small shelf, ready for the next inhabitant. A knee-high cot bed abutted one wall. The place was a lookout, built as a shelter against dragons and the elements washing in off the sea. They were unlikely to be disturbed while Ashford's elves worked to restore their home.

Eroan turned, about to announce they were safe and whatever Lysander had to say wouldn't be overheard, but he lost the words at the sight of Lysander's intense gaze. It was the kind of look a hunter gave its prey, but instead of fearing it, anticipation clutched at Eroan's breath. His own gaze dropped the tantalizing gape of Lysander's shirt, the dark skin a tempting display, demanding to be further revealed.

Eroan cleared his throat and steered his thoughts back around to where they needed to be. "We lost many. If you hadn't—"

Lysander's attention skipped away, taking in the hut's modest interior. He still had his hands rammed in his pockets, locking his shoulders tight. "I'm sure everything you're about to say is important, and we'll get to that, but I lied. I don't want to talk."

The dragon's glare skewed Eroan on the spot. He'd had that same look when he'd taken Eroan in his hut, when anger raced through both their bodies. He often recalled the rawness as Lysander had fucked him—it couldn't be called anything as sweet as lovemaking—and recalling it now sent a rapid pulse of heat, semi-hardening him in seconds.

"What I want... is you."

Eroan almost held the smile off long enough to play hard to get. Alumn, he needed this. After... everything. *They* needed this. "Is that really appropriate. You being undeniably dragon," he gestured at Lysander and then made a show of sweeping at himself, "and me being exquisitely elf?"

Lysander *tsked* his tongue against the roof of his mouth and sent his glare up into the hut's crossbeams, far away from Eroan. "Maybe not. Maybe I should leave? And that embrace outside Ashford?" He tutted. "Elves will gossip." Humor softened some of the violence shining in his eyes.

"Then we should give them something more to titter on."

The hut was only three strides from wall to wall. Three strides and Eroan could have him, but the thudding in his blood and the race of his heart would make the hunt sweeter if it were slower. For the first time in forever, they *had* time. Eroan had no duty to attend to and Lysander no battles to fight, save the one in his head.

Eroan reached for the laces tying his jacket closed and unraveled the knot near his neck, loosening it off. He tugged each loop, slowly opening the jacket, savoring it like opening a gift, then flicked open the top three shirt buttons. Lysander made a valiant effort not to look, and still kept his hands rammed so deep in his pockets they might be stuck there.

Rigid, he was holding himself back, either to protect Eroan or to entice him, either way, Eroan's heart strummed the rest of him, bringing him alive.

Lysander breathed in through his nose, held that breath, then sighed it out slowly. "Gods, I've missed you," he told the ceiling.

Eroan flicked open another button and Lysander's green eyes danced over him. Dark pupils darkened some more, swallowing the green whole.

His Lysander was still in there, and the relief of it made him brash, made him giddy. He had been afraid, but not *of* Lysander, he'd been afraid *for* him. He needn't have been. They would talk, but Lysander was right, they needed this now.

Lysander pulled his hands from his pockets and stepped *back*, leaning against the wall with a *come here* smile on his lips. Well, that wouldn't do. Eroan wasn't easy. If Lysander wanted what Eroan offered, he'd have to take it.

Eroan plucked a few more buttons undone and let the shirt gape open. Lysander's gaze scorched a trail down Eroan's chest and abs, then lower, unable to miss the proof of his arousal. Lysander's throat moved. Eroan wanted to mouth the dragon's fluttering pulse along his neck. He wet his lips and Lysander's attention snapped to his mouth. Eroan traced his top lip with the tip of his tongue. He'd soon taste dragon there, but not yet. Still, he let the promise of what he could do with his mouth sizzle between them.

Lysander adjusted his trousers, wincing. Eroan's erection ached in sympathy. By Alumn, he wasn't going to go to him, but the need to do exactly that had his fingers trembling at his fly. Lysander hunted every tiny movement. Eroan stroked his fingers along his own hip and Lysander's stare chased the trail. Eroan spread his hand over the hard ridge of his erection, watching Lysander's lips part and his chest rise and fall.

He had his dragon trapped behind a wall of need and planned to hold him there until he couldn't take it any longer, if the anticipation didn't break Eroan first.

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CHAPTER 27



Lysander

ANTICIPATION WAS a fresh kind of torture, one Eroan wielded like his dragonblade. When he'd walked to Ashford, to the elves who'd shot him from the sky, Lysander had been half-mad with violence and hunger and lust and rage and all the things dragons thrived on. Then Eroan had thrown his arms around him and the madness had shattered. He'd broken open in that moment and was still breaking now, with every sinful touch, every bold flutter of Eroan's blond lashes, every sly lick of his lips.

Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.

He wanted all of that, right now, in this tiny stone box, but if Eroan carried on the way he was, Lysander wasn't going to be able to rein in his need to capture this elf in every fucking way. Lysander had learned who he was, and it scared him. It scared him so bad he almost hadn't come back after searching for Dokul, afraid of what he'd done as dragon. The killing, the slaughter, he'd fucking become the monster he hated. It was different now. He was different. But not here, not in this moment in an elf hut on the edge of a cliff. Here he just felt... free. And he never wanted it to end.

Eroan was a vision of elf. His refined edges had frayed in Lysander's absence. A fresh wildness splintered Eroan's blue eyes, revealing the delicious sparkle of lust for life and for Lysander. He'd been pushed and he'd pushed back. The embrace alone was proof of that. Eroan from Cheen

would never have embraced him in public. But this new Eroan, he didn't give a shit, and Lysander wanted to taste him all over, make him scream with his new louder voice, make him come undone in his arms.

To do all that, he'd have to move, but if he moved from the wall, he wouldn't be able to stop what came next.

He'd killed Carline.

The madness was real. It was dangerous, and it was who he was now.

Lysander tore his gaze from Eroan and looked at the floor between them, clenching his jaw so hard bones ached. He'd wanted to make everything better, to change the world, but he'd changed himself, and gods, he was afraid of what that meant.

Eroan's hand brushed up his cheek, lifting his head, and the elf was there and everywhere and everything. His eyes shone with understanding, and then warm, wet lips teased across Lysander's, beckoning him to open.

"I'm afraid," Lysander whispered. Eroan's cheek brushed his. He leaned into the touch, breathing in elf and letting the smell of home chase away that fear. "I don't know who I am."

Eroan's fingers clutched fiercely at his face, forcing him to look, to see. "I do."

Lysander fluttered his eyes closed and ran his hands up Eroan's back, folding the elf in close again, needing that solid strength against him. Eroan moved closer, rolling his hips in and arching his back. The elf's skilled hands captured Lysander's hips, holding Lysander in place. Lysander sunk his hands to the small hollow above Eroan's ass and then over the rounded tightness. His fingers sank in, owning. Eroan's gasp sizzled across Lysander's ear and Lysander's control snapped, unraveling too fast to get it back. The growl was real. A warning. A threat. He suddenly had Eroan against the wall, trapped, and still, the elf writhed and ground his hips, driving Lysander fucking insane with need. His cock strained, painfully hard, needing to be *inside*.

"I don't want to hurt you," he breathed across Eroan's mouth, lifting his gaze, terrified of the fear he might see on Eroan's face.

"You won't." Half-lidded elven eyes seduced and teased and plucked on Lysander, pouring sparks down his spine.

It was all the permission he needed. Lysander captured the elf's troublesome hands and pinned them to the wall. Eroan arched instead, mouth open, inviting, while the rest of him rocked, thrusting at Lysander's

hip. He had no choice but to answer Eroan's demands. He growled into a kiss that tore him open and wrenched the rest of his control away. He rocked with him, kissing down his neck, tasting elf and the sea and the only fucking thing in this world that he truly cared for. He didn't know what Eroan would think of him when he learned what Lysander had done, and how he had felt doing it. The time for talking would come. But not yet. Gods, not yet. He needed to paint Eroan in his scent, to fuck him, and love him, and hold him close until he didn't know where he ended and Eroan began.

Eroan's hand escaped Lysander's hold and plunged down his abs and waist, capturing Lysander's engorged cock through his trousers. He gasped, maybe swore, certainly almost lost his damned load too soon. Lysander caught the hand and pinned it back where it belonged. Lust and mischief widened Eroan's eyes. Lysander's growls turned to breathless laughs. Only Eroan could do this to him, make him mad and make him happy in the same moment.

"Go down on me," Eroan demanded, his hard, sharp voice lashing like a whip.

Lysander's instincts almost snapped back. He was king, not a lower. But this was Eroan, and gods, he'd do anything for him. He buried his face in Eroan's neck and nipped at the flushed skin. "I kill dragons who speak to me like you just did."

The shudder that ran through Eroan spilled through Lysander too. He groaned out the agony. This fucking elf was wrecking him.

"Do they get to fuck you first or is that pleasure reserved for me?"

Lysander freed a twitching wrist and wrapped his fingers around Eroan's neck, but remarkably kept them loose. At Eroan's sudden intake of breath, Lysander let go, and slid his fingers under the male's shirt, mapping every inch of muscle. Tilting his hand downward, he pushed lower, riding over the angle of his hip, and then clasped the proud need straining inside Eroan's trousers. "You're a wicked tease, Eroan Ilanea."

Eroan tilted his head back, his chin up, and scorched Lysander with a scandalous gaze. How had the elves ever controlled this one? He was a raging wildfire. One that would never stop. Not for anything.

The laces snapped under Lysander's rough fingers and Eroan fucking laughed. He said something about needing the ties to hold on to his dignity when going back to Ashford. Lysander shut him up with a kiss and then felt

his breath hitch as Lysander clenched the elf's proud need in a fist. Eroan stole from the kiss, throwing his head back and panting. His slithery gaze flicked to Lysander's face and it was Lysander's turn to grin.

"Speechless now, elf?"

Eroan's hand landed on Lysander's shoulder and *pushed*.

"Your desire is my command," Lysander purred, sliding down Eroan's taut body. He came to rest on his knees. The erect cock was a prize. Lysander stroked his thumb from tip to base, pushed in hard, then flattened his tongue against the silken head, beneath the tiny slit. He flicked his gaze up, snagging on Eroan looking down, then flicked his tongue up too, sliding the wet tip over Eroan's pre-cum-slickened head. Eroan had both hands free now and plunged them into Lysander's hair. Restrained strummed through the elf. Lysander could taste that too. He wanted to buck his hips, to fill Lysander's throat. It was all in his glare, in the knotted grip in Lysander's hair.

Lysander lavished attention on the hungry, needy thing, feeling his own cock pulse and twitch, leaking inside his trousers. He took Eroan in, dragging the head over the roof of his mouth and down, sealing his lips and rolling his tongue, applying pressure to the sweet edge of pain. Eroan's panting started to fracture, his body quivering.

Lysander fucking had him, but he wasn't ending it there. He pulled free before the quivering signaled Eroan had tipped over the edge, grabbed the elf by the waist, and jerked him close. Now that Lysander had all his attention, he cupped Eroan's ass and lifted, plucking him off unsteady feet. Eroan fell on him, his hair a glorious mass of white, tickling Lysander on his cheek, his neck. Eroan's tiny elf teeth nipped at Lysander's shoulder, sinking in deep enough to nip off the end of Lysander's heaving breaths.

He kicked the cot bed around, away from the wall, and lay Eroan on his back, bracing his arms on either side to trap the elf in. Eroan looked up at him, a strange kind of rawness and vulnerability to him that few got to see, if anyone had seen it at all. Eroan lifted a hand and brushed loose knuckles down Lysander's face.

The jacket and shirt gaped. The male's body was a map; one Lysander wanted to explore with his teeth and tongue and fingers and eventually his cock, but first, a kiss. Lysander kissed him slow, kissed him deep, cupping his face and kissing him like he was a vanishing, fleeting thing, like that star he'd never been able to catch. Knowing how Eroan could wound with

his tongue, the softness with which he kissed back screwed Lysander's heart to the wall. The fear was all but gone now, because no beast could love as deeply as he loved this impossible creature. As long as he had Eroan, he'd be all right. Everything would be all right.

As Lysander let the kiss wander, nudging Eroan's jaw, Eroan's hands pushed Lysander's shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, running his warm hands over Lysander's biceps, adding a squeeze, because he was a fucking tease.

Lysander reared up and tore the shirt free, done with barriers and complicated clothing. When he fell back in, Eroan opened his knees, capturing Lysander between his thighs. But then Eroan's trousers, halfway down his hips, managed to lever Lysander away from the part he wanted to feel the most. He tore those off next, leaving Eroan clad in just the shirt and jacket and nothing else, and even those were all snarled up beneath him. Eroan's cock lay erect against his lower stomach, so fucking innocent a thing considering how it could turn Lysander's thoughts inside out. And gods, Eroan was stunning in his near nakedness.

Lysander licked a line up Eroan's cock, grinned as the head nudged his chin, and flicked his tongue higher, over the ripple of abs, around a nipple, until he found the elf's mouth. The bed groaned and creaked a protest. At the back of his mind, as he plundered Eroan's mouth and stroked his cock, he doubted the rickety cot would last through what he had planned.

Lysander roamed his hand back down—relishing the feel of Eroan's nails dragging down his back—skimmed around the wanting cock, and dipped at the smooth valley beneath Eroan's balls, finding the tight rim of his ass beneath that. He eased a finger in, kissing away Eroan's gasps until they turned into groans.

By diamonds, he'd wanted Eroan spread beneath him, panting and writhing like this, for the longest time. Beneath him, so he could see his face as they fucked. But this had stopped being a raw fuck sometime ago. Maybe when Lysander had gently lain Eroan down, or maybe before that, when Eroan had crossed the floor to him, knowing how much Lysander needed this.

Lysander dug under Eroan's hips and shifted him down the bed, propping his ass on the edge. On his knees again, Lysander spread Eroan's thighs and drenched his hand in the wetness, making Eroan's cock glisten. Once smooth, he worked his middle finger into Eroan's tight hole a second

time, this time feeling it slip smoothly in. His own cock was drenched and damned uncomfortable, neglected and still restrained inside his pants, but he'd get to it. This was for Eroan.

The elf arched off the bed. "*Fuck.*"

Eroan had lost his pretty words. Nobody said fuck better.

Lysander probed deeper, finding that sweet spot that made most males lose their minds and Eroan was no different. He clutched the bedside, air-fucking in time with Lysander's strokes.

"Alumn damn you, dragon. *Fill me.*"

Eroan reached for his own cock, grasping it. His eyes rolled, his mouth fell open, all of him open and inviting.

Lysander pulled his finger free and watched the elf work his hand over himself. Lysander salivated like a mind-numbed fool. Maybe he was wired wrong to enjoy the sight of an elf making his own pleasure. He'd been told he was wrong all his life. He found he no longer cared.

He was done watching. He clawed his way out of his clothes, finally freeing his cock. He stroked himself, shuddering out the pleasure while collecting all the wetness he'd need.

Eroan's half-lidded eyes drank him down, devouring every inch. "Come here."

So demanding.

Not even the dragon king could argue with this one.

Lysander leaned over him, pinning a knee on one side and locking an arm on the other, hovering above Eroan. The elf swallowed, his throat bobbing, pulse fluttering, then a small, knowing smile lightened his lips, like he was fucking shy.

Lysander ran a finger over that smile, capturing the feel of it forever in his memory. "You are my everything, Eroan." Gods, it was true. It hurt to say, and that's how Lysander knew this was love. The real kind, not the dragon kind.

Eroan sighed, slung an arm around Lysander's neck and pulled him down. He kissed like a dream, like a thing that wasn't real, couldn't be real. Lysander danced his tongue with Eroan's and lowered against him, careful to keep himself propped up enough not to crush Eroan, then grasped himself in hand and found Eroan's precious, tight nub of wrinkled skin. Tilting his hips, Lysander eased his raging cock into the forgiving tightness, nipping at Eroan's lips and tongue, distracting him, relaxing him. Eroan

tilted his ass, opening a new angle, and Lysander sank in, but it wasn't enough. He withdrew to the sound of Eroan's protests, pulled him down again, and knelt against the bed. Eroan's hole wept Lysander's pre-cum and Lysander answered the twitching summons by taking himself in hand again and guiding in. Pleasure danced down his back, snapping through his balls and cock. In he slid, deeper than before, so deep his hips kissed Eroan's ass and the tightness enveloped every throbbing inch. Lysander clutched the male's thighs, locking them close, and eased his cock out and arched in again. Curses spilled from his lips. He was coming undone.

Eroan's beautiful eyes blazed, locked on Lysander's.

Yes, this. This was peace at last. This was home.

He fell into a rhythm, holding back as much as he could, going slow, careful. "Touch yourself," he breathed.

Eroan clutched his own erection, his expert hands roaming over the head and sensitive inches, slicking his hand.

"Come for me, like this..." Lysander couldn't say anymore. Each word had a direct link to his cock, spiking the pleasure higher, driving needles down his lower back. Eroan obeyed, and Lysander hastened his pace, matching Eroan's hand pumping himself toward release. He forgot who he was in the next breath, forgot there was a world outside. Hips driving, sinking him into Eroan's exquisite tightness, he forgot they were dragon and elf, because none of that mattered. They were two souls, shining against the darkness in a dying world.

Eroan bucked, his hips jerking. His hole squeezed, he spat some kind of elven curse at the same time as his milk-white cum dashed his hand, abs, and hip.

Pleasure coiled, ever-tightening. Lysander admired the messy sight spread beneath him and thrust harder, hips slapping against Eroan's ass. Relentlessly pounding, pleasure sharpened to an excruciating point that had Lysander's skin sizzling and his mind lost. The release thundered through him, spilling free. He grunted, shuddered, lost his fucking rhythm and his seed all at once, and rode out the milking pulses until he was spent and wrecked, and oh-so ruined.

Gods, it had never been this good with anyone. Ever. Eroan was a drug, and Lysander greedily wanted more.

Reluctantly, Lysander withdrew, gritting his teeth against the sweet afterburn, and then bowed over Eroan's cock, flicking his tongue over the

trail of cum, but in doing so he discovered Eroan had a ticklish spot in the hollow of his hip. Eroan twitched and laughed. That laugh... It was a beautiful thing. Lysander was going to make it his mission to find all such weaknesses in Eroan and exploit them to hear that laugh a hundred times over. A thousand times, if he could. They had the whole day, the night too. Maybe, this time, they had forever?

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CHAPTER 28



Eroan

THE DRAGON PRINCE snored lightly against his shoulder. Eroan teased a lock of Lysander's hair through his fingers, marveling at its smoothness. He wondered how it worked, the magic, the *shift*. Where did this lock of hair go when he turned into dragon? Did it become some other part of him, a scale perhaps? But why wasn't his hair green? And when did they learn to pretend to be human? Was it an instinctual thing or taught? He mulled over such things while listening to Lysander snore. Lysander's body was a hard, hot mass of male, currently plastered down Eroan's side on the bed that was far too small for one, let alone two. A miracle, really, that the bed was still a bed and not shattered into pieces. Despite the bed, and the tiny hut, and the lack of food or water, he could stay like this, smothered by the smell of dragon and sex. Stay tucked against Lysander as though he were the protector, not Eroan. He liked that thought—not having to be the one always protecting others. He needed protecting sometimes too, didn't he?

The snoring ceased.

Lysander opened his eyes. He didn't say anything, the smile said it all, and then he pulled Eroan against his chest and grumbled an odd muddle of dragon chirping that had Eroan fighting back a laugh. He'd laughed enough. His ribs ached from it. Lysander had discovered his greatest weakness. A weakness he'd managed to conceal from everyone. He was ticklish.

Nobody knew it, not even Janna. Lysander had rooted it out and then decided to pursue every little sensitive spot, stroking with his fingers and tongue into places that surprised even Eroan. They'd made love again after that, Lysander spooned against his back, the dragon's touches achingly tender.

The tension that had rode them both on arriving was long gone. As was daylight. Seraph could only cover for him for so long before the Order began asking questions. He'd prefer to forget them all, but Seraph didn't need to suffer for his disappearance.

"You smell so good," Lysander mumbled, his voice sleepy and slow, like warm syrup.

Eroan could feel exactly how good pressing into his hip and with that, a few skittish darts of pleasure had his member warming and hardening. Lysander was insatiable, but then, so was Eroan.

"We *should* talk," Eroan began.

Lysander pressed a finger to Eroan's lips and held it there until Eroan rolled his eyes, summoning Lysander's dark chuckle. The same chuckle Eroan found he had a liking for, the same chuckle that had his semi-hard member now hardening off. With the sheets trapped beneath them, there was no hiding his interest, not that he would.

He assumed Lysander hadn't noticed, his attention all on Eroan's face, but then the dragon's finger was gone from his lips so it could find its new home, sliding around his erection. Eroan's eyelids fluttered. There was no use fighting it, he wouldn't last a minute. Lysander knew the effect he had on Eroan's body.

Eroan twisted to face him, crushed against his chest by the ridiculous bed. The position made Lysander's efforts awkward, but it also exposed Lysander's equally erect member, currently wanting but neglected. Eroan slid his arm beneath Lysander's, took him in his grasp and wasted no time making the dragon pant. It was uncoordinated and fast, the kiss only hastening the pleasure. Lysander came first, his reserves down to a dribble, but it didn't lessen the bright spark of desire in his eyes. The dragon's grunting tipped Eroan over the edge, spilling into Lysander's hand.

Lysander's dark, filthy chuckle was back. He wiped his hand on the sheets.

Eroan rolled onto his back and flung an arm out, resting his knuckles against the floor. They'd saturated the place with sex. The next elf who

visited would smell dragon and elf. There was no hiding what had happened here. "We'll have to burn this hut down."

"Really?"

A smile fought its way to his lips. "I'll build Ashford another."

"Are you ashamed of me?" Dark eyes sparkled.

"Not in the least."

Lysander propped himself on his side, his head in an upturned hand. "You don't care what they think happened here."

"I don't care what they think at all."

Lysander stroked a finger down Eroan's elven ear. Eroan let his eyes flutter closed. The finger traced down his jaw, then his neck, tickling over his collarbone, making his smile twitch and dance. Alumn, these tiny unrushed touches, he'd kill to keep them. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and found the dragon smiling. "We do need to talk."

Lysander sighed and dropped his head back into the pillow.

"Where are your dragons?"

He waved a hand in the air, still staring at the ceiling. "To the north, where the big river widens and the enormous metal skeletons rot in the bay."

"The Thames estuary."

"Yeah. There." Lysander turned his head again, blinking at Eroan. The depth was back, a new depth Eroan had noticed last night. Something had unlocked inside his dragon. "They won't hurt you. They're mine. Every single one."

"You found your calling."

"I did, and more. I..." Lysander closed his eyes. Eroan waited, letting him find the words. He wanted to tell him he was safe in this moment, but Lysander already knew it. "I killed Carline. I... She was Metal. She was stronger than me and there was a fight. I... I just killed her." He opened his eyes. The dark depths in them had grown hungry. "It felt good, Eroan. It felt so good. This power... I control dragons with a glance, but I'm afraid..."

"Of?"

"I don't know if I can control myself."

Eroan guarded his face. Carline had been kind, as much as dragons could be. The fact Lysander had turned on her brought back Nye's words of how Lysander would turn on him. Akiem had told him he loved a lie. And maybe if he'd learned of Carline's death from someone else and not spent

the last few hours loving Lysander, he'd be afraid of this new prince. But he wasn't. Because he did know Lysander, apparently better than Lysander knew himself.

"You killed her because you're dragon, and it's what you do. She was a threat."

"She protected me. She healed me."

"She was Metal. She would have sought to control you, just like all the others."

"But not you..."

Lysander's teasing fingers were back, leaving tingling trails down and around Eroan's neck where once a collar had kept *him* controlled. "It's quiet here..." Lysander sighed, then tapped his forehead. "And up here. When I'm with you. Here, now, everything feels possible. You make everything possible."

Lysander's fingers slipped into his hair and Eroan tilted his head toward the touch, seeking the warmth and roughness of Lysander's fingers. If only it could be like this for them, forever.

"I have a daughter," Eroan said. The hitch in his voice was entirely too raw. "Her name is Elle. And I can't be a part of her life."

Lysander's fingers stroked on, riding over his naked shoulder and sailing down, over Eroan's heart. "You already have someone to care for. Her name is Seraph and she adores you."

"She adores you too." Alumn, the tears were unexpected. He blinked, clearing them before they could fall. Seraph had been more to him than a student of the Order since the humans had carried her out of the bronze warren. He'd almost lost her then. Would have, if not for Lysander protecting her in the worst of places. He faced his dragon, marveling at how someone so strong could be so blind to his strengths.

"Do you think Seraph and Junoe fucked in this bed?" Lysander asked.

Eroan laughed short and sudden. "That's not an image I needed."

Lysander twisted onto his side again, smiling like the devil he was. "You corner this *Junoe*. I'll break his legs and threaten to eat all his bloodkin. That will soon put an end to it."

The laughter was back, so ready to spring free. Eroan couldn't remember ever laughing so much in so short a time. "You're impossible."

"I'm practical and territorial and Seraph is a part of my brood whether she wants it or not." He added a lofty, princely tone to his voice that Eroan

hadn't heard since the tower.

"You have a brood, prince?"

Lysander waved a playfully dismissive hand. "It's full of elves. I hoard them like other dragons collect gems. Clearly, I am broken—"

Eroan kissed him quickly, stealing the end of that sentence away. "Never." The prince's hand settled warm on his hip, pulling him closer as his gaze devoured Eroan's face. What did he see? Something that killed his smile and pinched his brows together. Something like how neither of them deserved the other?

"Is it true, your dragons won't hurt us?" Eroan asked.

"They won't hurt *you*." Lysander pinched Eroan's chin then planted a quick kiss on his lips. "As for those other assholes... It depends if they keep trying to kill me."

Lysander moved away, making an attempt to leave the bed. Eroan wasn't done with him yet. He locked a leg around his thigh and pulled. Lysander's warm chest brushed up Eroan's until they met, eye-to-eye. "Did you want something, elf?"

"Mostly your body on mine."

"Happy to oblige."

Their lovemaking was slow, a lavish exploration that Eroan could never tire of. He loved Lysander with his hands and with his body, and when those things were spent, he loved him with words. Because, more than anything, Lysander should know he was loved. And he needed to believe it. Finally, it seemed, he was beginning to believe. Eroan's heart swelled to see the true smiles, a real light blaze in the prince's eyes.

He'd love this dragon to the ends of the earth. Nobody could take that from them. Ever.



THEY PARTED in the quiet moments before sunrise, the sea air crisp with promise and the first hint of autumnal nights to follow. Eroan's fingers fell from Lysander again, but not for long. Lysander would wait a day near the old ruin at the edge of the forest while Eroan made his goodbyes. If elves or humans wanted to stay in Ashford, they could. The rest would return to

Cheen, or with Eroan, to his settlement—to the home with no name. And Lysander would join him there. They'd have *time*. Lots of it. Together.

He stopped at a nearby spring and splashed water over his face and neck, washing off the scent of dragon. By now, all of Ashford likely knew where he'd been and with whom he'd been with, but he didn't need to broadcast the fact so soon after the battle with the enemy.

Inside Ashford, the foyer had been cleared of the dead and mostly cleaned, although it would take some time to scrub the blood from the walls. The glass roof still gaped, but beneath it, the ancient tree stood defiant, if battered. Elves tied colored ribbons to the lower branches. Eroan watched them a while. Few wept, this custom was about remembering, not grieving. The tears would come later.

Alador arrived and drifted among his people, looking the part of an elder who happened to have daggers at his hips and shins instead of robes and tassels. The old elf carried dignity and wisdom in every step. He and Eroan had clashed in the past, but Eroan respected the male. He'd be honored to call him a friend.

"Eroan," Alador greeted, softly dipping his head.

They shared a moment side by side, watching the breeze flutter the tree's ribbons.

"I would like to retire from the Order." The words didn't hurt like he'd expected, in fact they lightened an invisible weight on his shoulders.

Alador's dark brows pinched together. He quietly considered Eroan's requests. Peaceful murmurs from the gathered elves sailed around them. "I don't think I've ever heard those words before. Not in all my years. And I've lived a long, long while."

"Because all of your assassins die before they can utter them."

Alador's mouth twitched and Eroan realized his mistake. Alador had lived and still he led the Order. The elder conceded with a nod and said, "Times are changing, Eroan. Assassins are surviving. They are living. We have effective weapons. We're fighting back. We're winning. Thanks to you."

"And to the humans."

"Ah, yes. The humans..." A few mingled with the elves. "You told me they could be trusted and I did not believe you. I was wrong not to listen." Alador's attention fell to a couple of humans who helped tie a green ribbon to a lower branch. The elf beside them said his thanks and a look of shared

grief and understanding passed between them. "They fought bravely for our home. It shall not be forgotten."

"Would you allow them to stay, if they wish it?"

Alador studied Eroan closely. "You ask that which others are afraid to. Some admire you for it, some... do not." He nodded. "I'll consult the council, but yes, I should think so."

Not so long ago, such a thing would have been impossible. He'd dreamed of this, hadn't he? He'd wanted change and peace between races. He'd seek Chloe out and suggest she stay, or at least let her kind know they were welcome. Ben and Chloe would be a valuable addition to the elves. Sharing knowledge had to be the way forward. "And my request to retire?"

Alador sighed and clasped his hands behind his back. "We'd be honored to have you among the Higher Order, on the ruling council."

Eroan couldn't hide the sorry smile. Xena had tried to recruit him as an elder, and now Alador, trying to fit him into a role he didn't want and never had. He was not made to dictate orders; he was made to see them carried out. But that was before Lysander. Now he had another reason to live and that reason wasn't welcome here.

"I've done enough," he said. "I hope you understand."

The elder nodded. "Then it is with great reluctance that I grant your request. Although I'll continue to hope you may reconsider. If you do, we will always welcome you. I'm proud of the Order, of every single member, but there's never been another like you, Eroan Ilanea. You'll be greatly missed."

Freedom. What a wonderful thing it was. "I plan to leave today."

"So soon?"

"With the dragons beaten, you have no need of me." Thinking of his waiting dragon, he added, "My own path beckons."

Alador lifted his gaze to the hole in the ceiling. "We do not know for certain they have gone. The sky is clear but there have been dragons reported along the northern border."

Had Seraph not told him? "I have it on good authority they won't be returning, at least not in a force you can't easily repel. I sent Seraph to tell you?"

"Seraph? Your young companion? I haven't seen her."

A needlepoint of fear poked at his thoughts. It was probably nothing. Yesterday she had said she'd tell Alador the skies were clear thanks to

Lysander. Perhaps she had been waylaid. “You didn’t see Seraph yesterday?” he asked again, to be sure.

“No, but I’ve been in the vaults, securing the artifacts... the last I heard of her, she was on the moors, attending the pyres.”

“When?”

“Yesterday morning.”

The same moment Eroan and Lysander had left her.

“Is something wrong?” Alador asked.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” He bid a hasty farewell and checked Seraph’s room. The dragonblade lay resting against her messy bed, but her boots and coat were missing. He picked up the blade, the twin to his own. She rarely went anywhere without it. Not for extended periods of time. If she’d been helping on the moorland, she’d have taken the blade with her.

Strapping the blade to his back, he collected his own from his room, settling both swords in place. Their weight was reassuring even if the circumstances were not. She’d be fine. She was probably above ground, still helping with the cleanup.

He asked the Order elves he came across as he made his way above, and then drifted among the smoldering pyres, asking after her. None had seen her since yesterday. No word of her, no sight of her, nothing.

Panic tried to clutch at his heart.

It was all right.

She’d be fine.

She was Seraph.

He alerted the sentinels, all the same. And then asked after this Junoe she’d mentioned. Maybe she’d rekindled her time with the *musician*.

Eroan found him back inside Ashford with the administrators, plucking on a lute while another female stood close, humming along with his music-making. He appeared to be a dainty elf with a charming face and a hint of roguish mischief about him.

Junoe’s eyes widened. He missed a note. “Oh shit!”

The lute clattered to the floor. Eroan’s hand around his throat did the rest. “Where is she?”

Junoe’s nostrils flared. “Eroan... friend, eh?” he laughed nervously. “Why the hostility?”

“I’m not your friend. Where’s Seraph?”

“S-Seraph?”

Eroan narrowed his eyes. “Don’t play naïve with me.”

“I don’t know. I swear. I don’t know! I haven’t seen her. I mean, not since, you know... after she got here. I saw her then. But I guess... you kinda know that. She said you’d get like this. That’s why we didn’t tell you! It was just some fun, right? Just some fun, friend.”

Eroan ignored the useless twitterings. “I don’t care of that. Where is she?”

The young male clawed at Eroan’s grip. “We were going to meet last night. I was late. I guess I missed her, I don’t know.”

Eroan bared his teeth. “Where?”

“The old satellite station.”

“The what?”

“A big white dish on the moor. We go there sometimes—north of the pyres. Where the moorland drops away. She wasn’t there. I swear. We didn’t, you know... We didn’t do anything.”

Eroan shoved off the musician before his control slipped from its leash and he did something he’d regret. She’d gone to the north to meet with this waste of space, without her blade, because she wouldn’t need it for what they had planned. She trusted this reed and he’d left her alone, exposed. Eroan pointed a finger. “I’m not finished with you.”

She wasn’t one to wait. She wouldn’t be there.

But he had to know. He had to check.

The sun beat down from its highest point when he had made it to the huge, white, metal dish, an old structure of laddered steel shaped like a bowl as though to catch the rain. She wasn’t here. He circled the frame beneath the dish and crumbling piles of aged brick. Old brush had grown up around much of the structure, shielding it from observers. It made for a perfect secret meeting place, or an ambush point.

He stopped, his eye caught by the splash of red over lichen-covered rock. Scratches. Overturned soil and dislodged moss. There had been a recent struggle.

Eroan turned on his heel and bolted in the direction of the forest.

CHAPTER 29



N_{ye}

THE UNRULY ORDER elf didn't weigh as much as he'd expected. She was all bite, this one. He adjusted her unconscious weight over his shoulder and plodded through the mud.

Dokul would be pleased, so pleased he might keep his hands off Nye for another week, maybe more. Nye's gift to the chief wasn't Eroan, but she was the next best thing. She'd always had an unhealthy obsession with the dragon, and now she'd pay for that obsession. She'd had this coming. It was her fault. Alumn, help him do the right thing. This one would bring Eroan and Eroan would bring the dragon, and this hell would finally be over.

The collar bumped around his neck, grazing against raw skin, reminding him of the *thing* he'd become. *That is no elf.*

He just wanted it to be over...

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CHAPTER 30



Lysander

LYSANDER RESTED his head back against a tree trunk and closed his eyes. Birds chattered and tweeted, causing a raucous somewhere farther down the edge of the forest. The wind had dropped, making the sun strong today. He heard dragons in his head, felt them pull on him, demanding he return, but that niggling itch he could ignore, for now.

He mapped out a future in his mind. It would be like this: He'd start a new life in a village with humans and elves while keeping control of the dragon flight he'd subdued. He'd be a protector, not a destroyer. He'd be good. In the afterglow of his time with Eroan, it seemed as though anything was possible. The reality would be more difficult, but he was willing. And with Eroan by his side, the madness in him had calmed. Together, they could change the future for the better.

Bracken crackled nearby. He cracked an eye open. Eroan darted over the uneven ground, coming in fast.

Lysander pushed off the tree. "That was quick. Did they throw you out—?"

"Seraph..." he breathlessly panted out, planting his hands on his thighs.

A chill robbed Lysander of warmth. He'd never seen that look on Eroan's face—elven eyes wide and darting—it reached into his chest and tore at his heart.

Two dragonblades lay crossed against Eroan's back. Seraph never willingly parted with hers.

Lysander moved in and Eroan's hand fell to Lysander's arm, leaning into him, *falling* against him. "What happened?" He'd never seen Eroan so shaken. It might have shaken him too, if he hadn't sensed Eroan needed someone else to be strong for him.

"Seraph is missing." He gulped air. "Your sense of smell is better than mine. Can you track her?"

Seraph. His little elf. Lysander swallowed a growl. "Not among so many other elves. If she were alone—"

"She wasn't in Ashford. She went north to a communications dish. There's... There's blood." Eroan's fingers tightened, cinching around Lysander's arm. "It leads north." Concern filled Eroan's eyes.

"My flight didn't hurt her." But even as he said the words, he wasn't sure. His connection to the flight was still new, still untested and raw. Maybe some had slipped his control. It wasn't as though he knew what he was doing. "Take me to the dish."

Eroan led the way back across the moorland. Blood scented the air as soon as they arrived at the upturned dish. He paced the scene beneath the structure, his skin chilled among shadows. But beneath the stench of smoldering pyres, he didn't smell any scent of dragon. "Dragons didn't do this."

The statement rocked Eroan. He looked around them at the gorse, the debris, looking for new foes to fight. "It has to be."

"I smell only elf and smoke. No new scents beneath those."

Eroan turned on the spot, fingers flexing at his sides. He stopped suddenly. His expression hardened into a cold mask. "Come with me."

Lysander followed, only hesitating when Eroan reached an Ashford foot-tunnel and plunged inside. The elves weren't going to welcome him. Despite all he'd done for them, they'd made that clear many, many times. But Seraph needed him. *Eroan* needed him. He wasn't hanging back now. He was king. And kings had power. His flight was a mental tug away. The elves would know to stay back.

He garnered a few glances pacing behind Eroan, until word spread that there was a dragon among them, and then the glances became glares, and the assassins began peeling from the shadows, distinct in their dark leather and bristling blades.

Eroan didn't seem to notice how a crowd had gathered in his wake. He walked deeper into Ashford, into parts no dragon had seen before.

Lysander's skin crawled under the scrutiny. He kept his head up, his eyes on Eroan's twin blades.

"Chloe." Eroan found her helping to erect a temporary section of wall. She saw him, smiled, but the smile died a second later. Either Eroan's expression banished it or it was the sight of Lysander over his shoulder that stalled her.

"Eroan?" She wiped brick dust from her hands. Behind her, elves froze at the sight of Lysander, wide-eyed, like rabbits caught in the open.

The dragon in him wanted to bare his teeth, especially now that they were the center of attention. Too many assassins here wanted to sink their blades into his skin. Their bloodlust tingled his tongue, plucking on instincts to fight back, to lose his control and rage at them all. He pulled his fingers into fists and maintained a neutral face, like he'd done countless times with Elisandra. Hidden who he was, what he was, for the sake of survival.

"Seraph is missing," Eroan said, his voice cutting. "I need you to rally every loyal member of our prides and bring them to search aboveground."

As Eroan ordered and organized, Lysander turned, sliding his gaze over the watching elves. This was not the time to rile them up. Their blood likely still ran hot from the battle. They had the numbers. The killers among them probably believed they could pounce before he could fight back. He didn't have his blades, Eroan had those, and these assassins were all armed with half a dozen each.

They *could* take him down.

Eroan had fallen silent.

Everyone had fallen silent.

A tic twitched in Eroan's cheek. Now he too scanned the observant crowd and the danger within. "My companion, Seraph, is missing," he told them all. "I'll take anyone willing to help find her."

Nobody moved.

Didn't they care?

Seraph was one of theirs. She was better than them. She cared when her world said she shouldn't, knowing it could cost her everything. Lysander would give his life for hers, and he was dragon. These fools weren't worthy of her. Or of Eroan.

Lysander's lips twitched, pulling into a sneer.

"Eroan, you bring a dragon into the heart of us."

The male who spoke was all lean and wiry, his skin wrinkled with age, but he carried himself like a leader. Eroan stiffened. The speaker had authority. He had to be one of their elders but dressed in blades.

"Alador," Eroan acknowledged, a warning running beneath the respectful tone. "Lysander fought his kin *for us*. Without him, the bronze flight would have overwhelmed our numbers. We'd all be dead. Ashford would have fallen and eventually all of elvenkind with it." Eroan's scathing glare sliced through them all. "Whether you care to realize it or not, you each owe this dragon your life and your freedom," Eroan flung a hand toward Lysander, "and if any of you so much as raise a blade to him, so help me Alumn, I'll kill any and all where you stand."

And there he was; Lysander's stupid, stubborn elf who stood against the entirety of his own people for a dragon. He hadn't realized there was room in his heart to love Eroan more, but he'd been wrong. This thing between them was boundless. It beat like a second heart and shone like a star he'd never been able to catch. But Lysander had caught him, and Eroan was all his.

Eroan let out a frustrated growl and started forward. "I'm done with every single one of you." The crowd of elves parted like water around a rock. He didn't see them bow their heads to him, didn't see them nod at Lysander, accepting him, didn't see them turn away and go about their business, and he didn't see Alador fix Lysander with a typically brittle elven glare that softened a moment later.

And just like that, Lysander was among them, a part of them: a dragon in a sea of elves. Gods, it felt *right*.



HE CAUGHT up with Eroan breaching the surface with a pride of elves, all spreading out to systematically search the moorland for Seraph. But it wouldn't be enough.

Lysander drew Eroan's steely gaze. "I'll shift and search from above, but I need your assurance your people won't fire on me."

Eroan's jaw worked. "I'll see to it."

Elves be damned, Lysander curled his hand around the back of Eroan's neck, clutching him by the nape and spread his fingers. He'd performed the same touch when they'd been locked together, sharing breaths and heartbeats. Eroan's lashes fluttered down and the ice in him thawed. Lysander pulled him close enough to kiss and lost himself in those beautiful blue, crystalline eyes. "We'll find her," he promised. "Believe it."

Eroan pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, biting down, and nodded. "Go." He clutched at Lysander's arm and then released him.

Lysander left him, weaving through the smoldering remains of dragon, feeling Eroan's gaze riding him through the shift and after, when he spread his wings and roared at the world.

Taking to the air, his wings lifted him higher, keeping a careful eye out for any stray ballista lances. He still ached from their first blow. When none came, he circled higher, scanning the scarred moorland below. Elves spread out like ants. Humans too. Farther, he saw where the grass still burned and where the dead dragons had yet to be carved up and dealt with, their bloated remains sweating in the sun. The air was full of smoke and oil and death. He wouldn't be able to smell her from so high up, but he could cover more ground, looking for anything out of place.

A pride of assassins had converged at the old satellite dish. Eroan had sent them. Eroan trusted them. Lysander screeched as he sailed above their heads, enjoying their flustered scurrying. A reminder, that was all, should any of them loose the arrows slung to their backs. He dipped his left wing and lifted his right, banking around the dish so close to the ground his wingtip almost brushed the gorse and the elves crouching there. Elven blood. He smelled it then, just a flicker. There and gone. His keen sight snagged on a messy line through the yellow-speckled gorse bushes, a disturbed path that couldn't be seen from the ground.

Leveling off, he beat his wings and climbed higher, watching the path stretch north, farther from Ashford, toward his flight. It vanished when the brush thinned. A few more loops and a flatted path among a field of ferns caught his eye. It could be nothing, just an elf track. On the wing, he'd know quickly enough.

What if his dragons had been behind this? He had to know, to deal with it. If they'd taken her, hurt her, he had to know before Eroan discovered the truth.

The path wove down, twisting around rocky outcrops and into a sheltered gully. Lysander lost it there, and scanning the landscape yielded nothing. His dragons were close now. Some yipped an alarm where they circled above the sprawling brown waters of the Thames estuary. Years ago, Lysander had often followed the river from the tower to the coast—to here. He'd sweep low along its widening surface, and where the waters spread and churned, the river mouth opening to the sea, he'd swerve among the jagged remains of some old-world structures, rotting and rusted in the mud. He saw those structures now, beneath his circling flight, great jagged metal things reaching for the sky, as though they'd been caught and were grabbing for freedom with huge, steel fingers.

Ships, his mother had called them. Vast things, like floating cities, topped with rotted containers. Lysander glided over them now, watching the deep water swirl and churn past the structures. They didn't look like anything human-made. Their huge black-and-red bellies lay exposed, half-rotted away. Gulls squawked and mobbed him when he dared get too close. Above, his own dragons circled, curious and wary.

As man, he could ask them if they'd seen Seraph, but they wouldn't know one elf from another anyway and it would take too long to question them all.

Sailing in low, the warm air lifting off the muddied banks keeping him aloft, he eyed the coastline. The air smelled of wet metal, so much metal, so much like the bronze warren. The metal stench was from the *ships*, the water slowly eating at their huge carcasses. But the taste of metal on his tongue summoned a rattle through his scales.

The biggest vessel pulled his attention in, luring his gaze from the river's edge back to its deeper central channels. A vast thing, it was ten times bigger than a fully grown dragon. It leaned to its side, stuck in the mud where it had died all those years ago. The tide was in, filling its cavernous holes with soup-like brown water. But half of its structure still poked above the surface.

His flight dallied above, squawking and chittering like the gulls he'd disturbed. He ignored them, swooping in over the vessel, and spied a relatively stable place to land. Even so, as his claws hit the deck, the enormous ship let out a painful groan.

Lysander tucked his dragon form away, easing the burden on the structure, and as man, approached the strange metal boxes and towers all

stacked together on top of the ship. So vast, they rose high above him, like some of the humans' old-world towers rising high above buried settlements.

Offsetting the ship's tilt by leaning to the side, he grabbed at salt-encrusted rails to ease around rotted deck sections. Perhaps these metal towers had housed people once or they were for storage?

This ship lay close to the riverbank. At low tide, it might have been possible to access it on foot. He'd just take a quick look inside. He'd be back on the wing soon.

Dropping through a hole, onto a lower deck, his nose twitched around the smell of metal and salt and dank river water. Shafts of light filtered through thousands of holes in the top deck, lighting the passages and his path from above. His skin itched. He rubbed at the goosebumps tickling the back of his neck. The reaction was due to the smell of being surrounded by metal. Nothing here could hurt him, not with his dragons above and his wing restored. He was king. Kings did not fear metal crypts.

"Seraph?"

The space grabbed his voice and flung it into the ship's cavernous depths, rolling it over and over in the dark. When it faded, the sound of river water hissed at the ship's metal belly and occasionally something somewhere *thunked*, probably debris carried by the river.

Lysander tentatively eased onward. Unsure. He wouldn't go into those depths. Just a little farther.

The ship groaned again.

A few steps ahead, the floor had rotted away. He inched close enough to see inside the darkness. No bottom. No nothing. Just the cold, wet dark. "All right," he mumbled. "I can take a hint." There was nothing here and whatever his gut was telling him had more to do with the metal here than finding Seraph.

He turned.

Light flashed across a pair of dark elven eyes.

Hands shoved at his chest.

Lysander reeled. Into nothing. The floor didn't exist. His balance tipped out from under him. He snatched at the figure wrapped in black, a figure that smelled like elf in this place of wet metal, and grabbed a thin wrist, yanking it with him. But it wasn't enough. Momentum had him in its clutches.

Backward, he fell. Heart leaping. Stomach whooshing.

The rusted ship tilted around him, under him. The elf fell too, with a shout, trying to writhe from Lysander's grip.

Cold air rushed in.

His heart lurched into his throat. The dark grabbed him and swallowed. The shift tried to rip free, but inside this much jagged metal, if he shifted, he'd find himself impaled on a dozen rusted metal swords. Down, he fell, down into the yawning nothing.

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CHAPTER 31



Eroan

AS THE HOURS passed and the sun dipped lower in the sky, it became clear Seraph had been taken. Eroan fought back useless thoughts, the ones telling him she was already dead, that he was too late, that he should have realized she was missing sooner, that if he hadn't gone with Lysander, she'd have been safe. These panicked thoughts were unproductive and distracting. He needed to act, but beyond coordinating the search, there was nothing else he could do. This was hell, he decided. A torture like none other. Seraph was out there. Hurt. That much was fact, and he couldn't *do* anything.

To make matters worse, Lysander should have returned by now. He'd seen him fly to the north but quickly lost sight of him. That had been in the morning. The sun was setting now, the sky bleeding, and he'd not returned.

Eroan paced the chunk of land near the Ashford entrance where he'd already worn a path.

What if the bronze had taken Seraph?

What if Dokul hadn't retreated at all?

What if he'd been close by, waiting for an opportunity...

No, no, that couldn't be right. Lysander hadn't smelled dragon.

Eroan flexed his fists, wanting to palm his swords and fight someone, anyone.

He envied Lysander's wings. Had he been dragon, he could track them both down and rage at whoever had dared take them from him.

What if Seraph was already dead?

What if Lysander was hurt?

"Eroan?" Chloe's accented voice broke through the madness, if only briefly. He threw her a look as she emerged from the path. She flinched.

"News?" he snapped.

"Nothing."

"Then why are you here?!" He knew it wasn't her fault. Nobody was to blame, but he needed a target. "Try the forest. Go deeper—"

"They're losing the light, *mon cher*. The search will be postponed."

No, no! They could search by torchlight, by smell, Alumn damn them all. He stopped pacing. He couldn't think. This wasn't helping. He knew they had to stop the search at night or they'd lose more elves to wolves. He didn't want more to die. But stopping made him want to tear into his own chest and rip something out. He couldn't stop. Alumn, he was going mad just *waiting*.

A gentle hand sought out his shoulder. He almost snarled at her, but when he dropped his hands, her face was warm and kind, and now she had him, pulling him close, and it was all he could do not to sob in her arms. "I can't lose them, Chloe."

"Lysander will find her. He's likely with her now, bringing her home."

No, he wasn't. He could feel it like ice in his blood. Something terrible had happened to them both. And Eroan was here. Doing nothing! He pulled from Chloe. "I'm searching through the night. I don't expect anyone else to. Go inside, take shelter, begin again at dawn."

"Eroan, it's too—"

"Don't. Just... don't. I will go mad if I do not do something."

"This is not like you. You're not thinking clearly. At least take another Order elf—"

He made for the nearest torch sitting upright and unlit in its bracket, plucked it free, and pulled the firestarter from his pocket.

The firestarter Lysander had kept with him.

They'd shared a campfire once, in human ruins, and Eroan had asked him whether the egg or dragon came first. They'd met at the fallen oak and Lysander had lit the fire, and afterward, they'd spent the night under the stars. Lysander had saved them all when the tower fell, and afterward, he'd

woken and given Eroan this flint and steel, asking, *What is this thing between us?*

Alumn, he couldn't lose his dragon.

Eroan struck the firestarter, setting sparks flying, and lit the torch, breathing into it, making the flames glow. Dark be damned, he was finding them both.

"Eroan? *S'il vous plaît*. Do not go alone."

He ignored her and set off into the dusk.

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CHAPTER 32



Lysander

THE FALL WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO bad had he hit water without hitting the jagged piece of metal first. As it was, the metal protrusion had dug in like a dragon's claw, flipped him over, tearing open a jagged slash, and smacked him face-first into a glutinous mud.

He tore his head back with a gasp and clawed at his eyes, fighting with the gunk to see. A blur of black loomed ahead. He swung, the blur vanished, and then a boot landed between his shoulders. The mud had him again. He twisted, prizing half of his chest free, and then the same boot thumped him in the chest, sending him backward. Mud crept around his shoulders. Its cool fingers slid over his chest. He snatched and groped, flailing wildly in the dark, but the weight pinning him down wasn't moving.

A warm hand smothered his mouth and pushed.

Mud wormed into his ears, up his cheeks, around his chin. He panted through his nose, the only part of him not smothered, but soon that would go under too. Gods, he couldn't see to fight. Mud spluttered at his nostrils. *Shift.* As soon as the thought came to him, fingers looped around his neck and yanked.

The mud let go with a gasping slurp.

"If it were my choice, you'd be dead."

He knew the voice.

The elf that had poisoned him back in Cheen, leading to all this. Nye.

A growl bubbled up Lysander's throat. He blinked, still blinded by mud.

Something cold and hard struck him in the side of the head, almost ripping the consciousness out of him. His gut heaved, his head thumping and ears ringing. If he could just... think straight, just gather his thoughts enough to figure out the dark space they were in.

"Eroan should have killed you. He failed. I will not."

Gods, this elf was a vicious menace. If he could see, he could fight, he just needed time to get this viscous stuff out of his eyes. "Jealous...?" Lysander slurred.

That earned him another thump to the head and the dark folded in for real.

He woke chained to a steel strut, listening to metal groan and water slosh somewhere beyond the metal walls. Still inside the ship's metal bowels. Torchlight flickered in the corners, making his head throb, but at least he could see. The floor and walls glistened red with wet rust. Metal. It was in his gut, in his head and veins, under his damned skin.

"Such a loyal pet."

Lysander didn't want to hear the voice, because if he heard it, that meant it was real, and that meant Dokul was here, but Dokul had fled. This was just an elf's doing. Elves he could beat. But Dokul...

Shuffling and grunting alerted him to another form to his left.

He lifted his head, wincing at the hot hammer-like blows of pain trying to crack his skull open. He blinked, but one eye remained bloodied and blurred. With the other, he saw Seraph tied to a metal strut just like his. A filthy gag clogged her mouth. Blood crusted the right side of her face. Her head hung forward, her chin on her chest.

She was alive.

That was good.

Just so long as the bastard hadn't touched her...

Fire flared in his veins. He tugged on the chains, making them rattle, and looked up, flinging his glare at Dokul. The male was as big and foul as always. Lysander's body rebelled at the sight of slick skin and thick muscles. He could taste him all over again, feel him too, a weight on his back, the breath on his neck. But if he could capture the bronze with his glare, it would all be over. He'd control him like he controlled all the others.

Dokul had already looked away to where Nye knelt on the floor. Dokul patted him on the head. "You've done well."

"You piece of metal *shit*," Lysander added the weight of his true self to the words, making them growl.

Dokul's stupid smile twitched, but he didn't look over.

"C'mon, you want me, right? That's why you attacked Ashford. It's all been about me. Well, here I am, you fucker. *Look at me.*"

Dokul's breathing deepened, his chest expanding. He lifted his head but instead of looking at Lysander, he fixed Seraph beneath his glare. "You have much to learn, prince."

"I am a king now, and I'm going to make you kneel to me, you fat fuck. You can service my cock, and you'll do it like you fucking worship *me.*"

The male's cheek twitched. "You call yourself king." A soft laughter rumbled out of him. "Your ignorance is typical of you, wretched jeweled."

"Look at me!"

Dokul nodded at Nye. "Did you really think I'd be that easy to control?"

The elf rose to his feet, pulling a length of cloth through his fingers as he approached. The end of a leash dragged across the floor behind him, its other end clipped to a collar around the elf's neck. Dokul's pet. For a proud elf like him, that collar would be torture enough. Lysander couldn't find it in him to care. The stupid creature had caused all this.

The chains bit and clanked as Lysander worked his way to his feet, dragging the chains up the strut behind him. "Stay back or I'll bite your fucking face off, elf."

Nye smiled and circled around behind Lysander, forcing Lysander to twist and try to follow, not wanting to expose his back, but the strut was too wide and kept snagging the chains, jolting him to a stop. Nye's arm swooped around from the left. The piece of cloth flew in. Lysander ducked. The cloth caught him around the throat instead of the eyes. The elf tried again, and Lysander bucked and twitched, making him miss every time.

A stupid piece of cloth wasn't going to stop him.

Dokul's thick fingers slammed over both Lysander's eyes, cracking Lysander's damaged skull back against rusted iron. His thoughts spun again, gut roiling. He hadn't heard him move and now he was close, so close. Fear had Lysander's heart pumping too hard, his breath racing. Rough hands smothered his face. The wound in his back throbbed. The

bronze pushed in and panic tightened every inch of Lysander's skin, pulling him in, making him small.

"I'll fucking shift—"

"Not with your elf friend so close."

Gods, he was right. If he shifted, his mass would crush Seraph.

His heart rattled. He tried to toss his head, but the male's hands clamped on, his thumbs pressing in.

His flight. He was better. Stronger. He mentally plucked on the strings of all dragons close by and heard their brittle screeching calls far above the ship.

Dokul's wet lips brushed Lysander's. Lysander tore his head to the side and the male leaned in. His next words bit at his cheek. "If they land, the ship will sink farther into the mud and drown us all." The male's big hands spread around Lysander's head, fingers wide, holding him firm. "I've killed thousands of emeralds like you." His hands twisted, so his palms cupped Lysander's cheeks. His thumbs pushed against Lysander's closed eyes again, like the bronze was mapping every inch. "Slippery emeralds. Emeralds who thought themselves above the metals."

The male was everywhere, beneath Lysander's skin, behind his eyes, against his body. His aroused cock probed at Lysander's hip, but it was the hands on his face that summoned true, icy-like fear. Those hands could crush his skull, but Dokul didn't want him dead. He'd never wanted that.

Dragons screamed outside. The ship let out a shuddering groan and tilted. Seraph's scream behind her gag joined that of the horrible sound of twisting metal.

No, no... The ship was tipping. Water hissed and thrashed against metal.

Lysander pushed his flight away and the metal decreased its shuddering. Seraph lived. Nothing else mattered. He'd endure, he always did. But Seraph had to live.

"That's better," Dokul purred. "Now, where was I..." His thumbs pushed and a new pain throbbed behind Lysander's eyes. "I need your cock for breeding and nothing else. As for these eyes of yours... They are as precious as emeralds."

His thumbs dug deeper. Nails scored bone. Lysander had nowhere to go. Dokul's hands had him fixed to the strut. He couldn't turn away, couldn't

fight, couldn't shift. The thumbs pushed deeper, lighting Lysander's eyes on fire.

"Don't..." He trembled and hated it. "Please don't."

"The power was always in the eyes."

Lightning agony tore through his skull. Gristle and sinew collapsed. He screamed, too lost to the nightmare to hear it. He didn't feel Dokul withdraw, didn't feel the floor when he fell upon it, didn't feel anything outside the thunderous agony. He wept blood. He felt that. Tears of blood running down his face.

Someone sobbed, and he didn't know if it was himself or Seraph.

"Untie the elf," Dokul ordered.

"What?" Nye balked. Beneath the thumping and hammering, Lysander heard the panic in the elf's voice.

"Don't question me. You're doing so well. Untie her. She cut me. I owe her for that."

He couldn't see. The dark was everywhere now, suffocating Lysander, smothering him. But none of that mattered. He groped for the chains, feeling their cool curves in his hands, and pulled at the links one by one, running them through his fingers.

"No," Nye said.

The crack of knuckles on flesh and the tumbling of someone falling. Dokul had struck Nye.

"Come here, bitch."

Lysander tugged at the links, trying to find a weak one, just one.

Seraph's panting became too loud. She scrabbled and pulled at her chains too, their loud clanking hiding how Lysander prized his apart.

"Stop!" From Nye.

More scuffling. Lysander filtered it out. He knew where they stood, could hear them, he just needed to get free. A link buckled beneath his fingers. He pulled the chain free of the strut.

Scurrying. Grunts. Blood. But he'd never mistake the bastard's stench. Recalling the tilt and layout of the chamber in his mind and placing Dokul within it, Nye beneath him, either being fucked or beaten, Lysander roared and ran at them both. He lifted the chain, felt it snag, heard Dokul grunt and then went down, tumbling against bare metal and rust. His arm, his hip. Metal scoured at his skin.

"Get her free!" He yelled for Nye. "Run! Go. Get out!"

He pulled the chain tight, knowing without seeing that it locked around Dokul's neck, but the loop was all wrong, like it had snagged some other part of him too. And within moments, the chain jerked forward. Dokul sucked in air. A solid weight of him knocked Lysander down.

"Saving elves will get you killed, you foolish welp."

Hands. Everywhere. Around his neck, between his thighs, groping, clawing.

Lysander listened to other things, to Seraph's chains falling, to hurried footfalls against metal, leading away. Good. She'd go free, she'd get Eroan.

Dokul's weight vanished.

"No. No!" Lysander groped at the air, but Dokul was already gone.

The rest of it he heard in bits. Shouts. Cries. Muffled groans. He heard it and clawed at the metal floor, crawling into nothing, trying desperately to see. But it was gone. All gone. And without the sight, he couldn't control his flight. In seconds, Dokul had taken his gift, his curse. He was a broken prince all over again, but worse than that. He'd never again see how the sun glittered on the sea. Or a rainbow brighten dark skies. He'd never see Eroan's blue eyes and sly, forbidden smile.

He couldn't face this. This wasn't a broken wing. It was worse, so much worse.

He'd thought he was powerful. He'd thought he knew who he'd become. But it was a lie. He heard Elisandra's mocking laughter swirling around him mixed with the sounds of the ship.

The metal floor vanished under his hand.

He reached out again and patted around the edges of a hole in the deck. *Get away.* He could do that. He could get away. He could shift and maybe that would see the wounds moved... It hadn't with his mother. He'd taken her eye as dragon and she'd lost it for good.

The hole opened before him. Big enough to fall through. Wet air wafted over his face. He might fall into something worse. But how could it be worse? If he stayed, only hell awaited him beneath Dokul. He'd been to that hell. He'd rather die than go back.

Lysander pitched forward. He fell for seconds, for a lifetime, until a great weight of water caught him. It poured in and over, bubbling up his nose and down his throat. He tumbled, kicked and clawed, grasping at nothing, anything. There was no light, no way out, no up or down. And this was how it ended, he realized. It seemed so... pointless. His lungs thumped

and throbbed, screaming for air, joining the cacophony of pain, until even that faded to nothing. He wished he'd stayed a little longer in the clifftop hut with Eroan wrapped in his arms. He wished he'd told him he loved him, that he'd never believed he was good enough for love, that Eroan should live—whatever happened, he should live—because the world would miss Eroan Ilanea. But it would not miss a broken dragon. He closed his hand around the carved dragon pendant and squeezed. It wasn't so cold anymore. And the pain was less now too. The thumping in his head faded.

Would Alumn find him in this dark place?

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CHAPTER 33



E_{roan}

EROAN SEARCHED LONG after the torch had extinguished, into the night. He searched until the rough gorse had cut his hands and there wasn't an inch on him that didn't ache. He searched until dawn painted the wide river mouth pink and made the metal monoliths cast their long shadows back up the river.

Lysander's dragons peppered the skies here. They'd seen him and ignored him, thankfully. He didn't have the energy to fight one off, certainly not all of them. They seemed agitated, which was part of the reason he'd found himself so far from Ashford, walking the marshland abutting the estuary's edge. Perhaps those dragons knew something he did not.

A black smudge marked the mud where the tide had pulled back from the shore. Debris, probably. The coast was littered with all manner of weird and twisted things from the old-world, mostly bits of metal off the monuments reaching from the river. He was almost past it when a couple of gulls flew in and started picking at it, prompting the debris to *move*.

Eroan stopped, lifted his hand, and squinted into the low morning light.

An arm lifted, peeling the rest of its bulk out of the mud.

The figure got to its feet, but he staggered and fell again. Mud caked what appeared to be a male outline. He was on his feet again, clearly

disorientated as he staggered about. He had something in his arms. Perhaps a length of rope? The figure stilled, shielded his eyes, saw Eroan, and ran.

Eroan bolted along the bank, matching the male's retreat easier on dry ground. The male fell again and again, slowing until Eroan figured he could wade out and cut him off. He'd made it halfway when he realized the item the mud-caked male held was a length of leather, its end attached to a collar around his throat.

Nye.

Eroan fought through the hungry mud, gaining on Nye's every stride. The race had been lost from the beginning.

Eroan grabbed him from behind.

Nye swung around, launching a fist.

Eroan ducked and punched into the male's middle, ripping the breath out of him. Nye slumped forward, hugging onto Eroan. He smelled of metal and mud and blood. Eroan flung him down into the mire and watched him scrabble on his back, gasping for air. His wide, white eyes found Eroan. He rolled onto his front and began to crawl toward the riverbank.

"Don't.... don't.... It wasn't supposed to happen," Nye muttered. "She was all right..."

She?

Of course. Lysander hadn't smelled dragon at the satellite station because a dragon hadn't taken Seraph.

Eroan freed one of the dragonblades and followed Nye's crawling retreat. "You took her."

He crawled on, fingers digging into the mud.

"You took Seraph." Eroan placed a boot on his back and leaned in, trapping Nye in the mud. Bubbles popped either side of his body, the mud greedily taking him into its embrace. Eroan wasn't prone to hate, but the hate he felt for Nye was a visceral thing that had him wanting to drive the sword through Nye's spine and end it now. Eroan wanted to scream at him, to demand to know why he'd done all the terrible things he'd done.

Eroan pressed the dragonblade's tip against Nye's neck, his boot still firmly applied to his back. "Where is she?"

Nye craned his neck, trying to keep his mouth out of the mud. Tremors had water dripping from his matted hair. When he turned his head, his jaw glowed an angry purple. Cuts marred his face. He'd fought. Or someone had fought him. Likely Seraph.

Eroan scooped up the leash with his free hand, wrapped it around his fist, and pulled. “Where. Is. Seraph.”

“The ship,” Nye croaked. “Dokul.”

Keeping Nye pinned, Eroan glanced behind him, out into the estuary where the dragons circled. The biggest of all the metal structures loomed above all the rest. Seraph was inside.

“You left her with Dokul?” Disgust gave his words a jagged edge.

“We tried—I tried to help her—”

“You took her!” Eroan heaved the leash, pushing down on Nye’s back while lifting his head. He leaned over Nye, dragging the blade down the edge of his neck. “She’s still there?”

Nye clawed at the collar, mouth agape, desperately seeking air.

He couldn’t answer. A twitch and Eroan would spill his blood in the mud. There would be no ribbon on the tree for Nye. Eroan would burn that ribbon instead. But he couldn’t kill him. Not yet.

Eroan tore himself free of Nye and staggered back a few steps in the mud. “Lysander?” The voice that came out of him was rough and dark and brittle, but not the kind that would break, the kind that would shatter, unleashing all the rage inside.

“Lysander...” Nye pushed up. His arms shook as he held his weight off the mud. “He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Dokul... Dokul took...” Nye dropped his gaze.

Eroan lunged, grabbed Nye by the neck and heaved him to his feet. Eye-to-eye, he wondered if Nye had any honor left in him. “You had better find your voice now or I’ll rip the words from your throat.” He threw him down, splashing mud.

Sobs tumbled from Nye’s lips. He tried again to lift himself, pulling his body up, but the mud kept sucking him back down. “I can’t... I don’t... This—”

“Nye! Fucking tell me!”

“It was all he deserved!” Nye’s shout barreled across the river.

The finality of Nye’s words splintered Eroan’s heart. He was breaking inside, piece by piece but on the outside, he wrapped himself in ice. “Is he dead?”

“Yes. No.” Eroan lunged again but Nye whimpered back. “I don’t know!”

“You escaped. Where was Lysander when you escaped?” Speaking felt slow; the words were too heavy. He didn’t want to be here, he wanted to be on the ship, but he needed to know everything Nye knew and that meant questions.

“It’s a maze in there. We were inside a room. There are holes everywhere. He almost killed me pulling me into a hole with him.” Nye looked up and winced. “Dokul blinded him.”

Eroan’s thoughts stalled. “What?”

“He blinded him, took his eyes...”

The mud, Nye, the sea, the air, it blurred at the edges. Eroan’s breath stuttered, his heart too. Oh by Alumn, hadn’t Lysander suffered enough?! “No.”

“I saw it!” Nye shrieked, misinterpreting Eroan as thinking he’d lied. “I was there. He screamed... Alumn, it was horror-filled.”

Eroan almost fell, but if that happened, he wouldn’t stand again, and he was not done. “Lysander was alive when you escaped?”

A haunted look paled him. “Dokul is disgusting. He was going to... He wanted Seraph, but... I said no. He hit me, he tried to... Then Lysander was on him and it happened so fast. I got Seraph free. We made it a little ways while Dokul was... busy with *that dragon*. I don’t know—”

Busy with that dragon. Oh, Alumn, no. Eroan had promised Lysander Dokul would never touch him again. He’d known something was wrong. He’d felt the wrongness in the world and now he was too late.

Eroan had lunged so quickly he left his own thoughts behind. He’d locked a hand around Nye’s throat and plunged the blade through Nye’s gut, and now his thoughts had caught up, everything about this felt absolutely right. Shock blanched Nye’s face. He clutched at Eroan’s arm in a feeble attempt to push him off.

“*That dragon* is called Lysander and he’s worth a thousand of you.” Eroan twisted the blade. Nye would have screamed had Eroan’s hand not been around his throat. The wound in his gut would gape now, and it would bleed and fester and eventually kill. Pulling the sword free, Eroan dropped Nye to his knees. He would die slowly. It was all he deserved.

Nye clutched at his middle. Blood welled between his fingers and bubbled from his lips.

Eroan stepped back once, twice. Blood dripped from the edge of his blade into the mud, mixing with river water. Nye would die here. Maybe the

tide would come in and drown him or maybe the wound would see to it. Either way, he'd die slowly, in agony. It was done.

Nye gaped at him. He fell forward onto a hand and sobbed some more, and then reached, as though he could call Eroan back. "I did it for love."

Eroan turned his back, sheathed the sword, and headed for the water's edge.

"I did it for love!" Nye shrieked, voice cracking.

He said it over and over, until Eroan dove into the water and lost the sounds beneath the slosh of river waves.



THE METAL BEHEMOTH GROANED and shuddered and *breathed* as Eroan navigated its dark, skeletal passageways. The odors of rust and sea overwhelmed any scent of dragon, but after investigating deeper into the dark, he picked up the sounds of voices. The ship's old innards scattered sound, tricking Eroan into dead-ends and flooded pools, but eventually, he found the main chamber below deck and crouched beside a hole in the floor.

"He'll return..." Dokul's deep voice boomed like a drum. His boots thumped on the metal floor, lending the ship a rapid heartbeat. "He'll return. They always do. Like you... *You* came back. Couldn't stay away." He walked and talked, his sentences short and sharp, unlike the relaxed and confident male Eroan had first met in the queen's chamber.

From Eroan's position, he could see only moving shadows. He'd need to lower himself through the hole in the deck to get a better view, but that risked being seen. Better to wait and to listen.

"He's likely dead." Akiem sounded as rigid and cold as the vessel surrounding them.

Then it was Akiem who had *returned* and clearly not left again. Had he stayed because he wanted to, or for some other reason? Eroan had been careful not to tell the dragon anything of use, but hearing him here, back under Dokul's wing, niggled that part of him that wondered if Akiem had lied about everything.

"If he didn't die escaping, in his weakened state, his own dragons would have finished him off."

Eroan's thoughts raced. Akiem's voice had quivered, but under the sounds of Dokul's thumping boots, the Bronze chief likely hadn't heard the brief lapse. He cared. He cared that Lysander was missing.

"He's not dead. Not that one." Dokul growled. "He survives. He always survives."

"That he does well," Akiem agreed.

Eroan tried to interpret the tone, but without seeing Akiem, there was no way of knowing if he was humoring the bronze or agreeing with him. But he was here, and didn't sound wounded or aggrieved, suggesting he was here willingly. If he could separate Akiem from Dokul, corner him and get answers without the bronze knowing, he'd know what steps to take next.

"The elf will still come," Dokul grumbled. "My pet will see to that."

Nye had been freed as a lure, a hook to reel Eroan in. He hadn't escaped, as he'd said. Eroan wasn't surprised.

"Perhaps," Akiem began, "I should scour the shore for Lysander—"

"No. You're staying. I have you. I have the little one. The pretty elf will come and so will Lysander."

"Your plan is to just... *wait*?"

The wet smack of a fist on flesh reached Eroan. He winced in sympathy, almost feeling the blow himself. Akiem shouldn't have pushed the brute.

A whimper pricked Eroan's ears. He leaned closer to the hole, listening hard, trying to pick apart the sounds of a beating. Seraph. Thank Alumn. She was alive.

Dokul's relentless attack stopped and Seraph's whimpering increased.

"The elf is too brittle a thing for entertainment," Akiem said, his words now riddled with disdain. "We need her as bait. Fuck her and you lose the advantage."

"Clearly you haven't met this one. She's not as weak as she appears."

Chains rattled. Seraph's muffled cries plucked on Eroan's nerves, trying to spur him into action.

"Are you, little elf?" the bronze purred.

She breathed too fast. If the bastard *touched* her. Eroan leveled his breaths and willed his heart to slow. He couldn't fight Dokul and Akiem without a plan. But to have a plan, he needed to see.

Bundling his hair over one shoulder, he balanced over the hole in the deck, arms braced either side, and leaned down, inch by inch revealing

more and more of the chamber beneath. Rusted floors. Seraph's dangling legs. Dokul's solid stance and naked back.

Eroan's hair slipped forward. He jerked his eyes up and met Akiem's dark-eyed surprised expression.

Dokul's back was to Eroan. One word from Akiem, one wrong glance, and Dokul would know.

Eroan held his gaze. This was the black prince's moment. His chance to do something right. If he gave Eroan up, they'd all die here. Perhaps not at first, but their deaths would come. Akiem must have known that. The moment stretched, seconds dragging on too long.

Dokul began to turn his head.

Akiem cleared his throat and stepped up to the bronze, as lean as a blade to Dokul's solid physicality. "I was thinking that perhaps you and I might find some time... alone." Akiem's trembling fingers landed on Dokul's shoulder. The words sounded smooth, laced with seduction, but his fingers trembled.

Dokul dropped Seraph. She crumpled on her knees beside him, her head down, hair hiding her face. Tremors shook her.

Akiem's hand slid over Dokul's smooth shoulder. Dokul stilled, his attention locked on Akiem. The black prince's eyes had gone cold, emotionless, but the smile pulling at his lips was a masterful lie. Blood had smeared his chin and bruises bloomed where Dokul had struck him. Neither deterred him from his target. "You like to fuck amethyst ass."

Dokul's hand wrapped around Akiem's throat, forcing the prince's chin up. "Found yourself a liking for cock, have you, princeling? I'd claim credit for that if I didn't already know your brood. You've always liked some meat in your diet, eh prince? Just hid it better than Lysander."

Akiem's steely glare skipped over Dokul's shoulder to Eroan. This was his sacrifice. The black prince who had wept on his knees, the wreck of a dragon who had come to Eroan to die, was still inside him. He didn't want this, but he'd do it... to save an elf; perhaps to save them all.

Dokul tensed. Akiem's eyes widened a warning. Eroan levered himself back through the hole and crouched near its edge. A hard slap and crack was followed by the dead weight of someone falling and Dokul's fevered breathing.

Eroan closed his eyes. He didn't owe Akiem anything. The bastard was as dragon as they came. But as the scrabbling grew frantic, his stomach

rolled. He knew what the bronze would do next. Seraph would see, if she hadn't seen such things already.

Damned dragons.

Turning around, he gripped the hole's sharp edges and dropped through, landing lightly on his feet. Akiem lay sprawled on his back, semi-conscious, while Dokul towered over him, his hand making quick work of his pant ties to free himself.

Seraph jerked her head up. Her red-rimmed eyes streamed. Purple blotches smothered her jaw and neck. Dokul had touched her. Hurt her. He didn't know what else but prayed to Alumn it had gone no further than that.

He pressed a finger to his lips and reached behind him, releasing the twin blades.

Dokul suddenly turned, moving fast for a creature so big. He saw Eroan and smiled.

Eroan dashed forward.

Dokul braced his stance, anchoring his weight to the floor. He threw an arm up, blocking Eroan's downward strike, and made a grab for the second blade. He missed.

Eroan plunged the blade forward, sinking its edge in Dokul's side. The dragon roared and whirled, the full weight of his rage like a tidal wave, smacking Eroan aside.

Eroan rolled, sprang to his feet and lunged again. The blade's edge cut through Dokul's raised arm. The dragon staggered and Eroan stole the advantage, ducking under Dokul's swing to plunge the second blade into his gut. The sword juddered, scraping against bone, sinking in so deep Eroan was sure it would see the dragon dead.

So fast. It had all happened in a blur, between seconds.

A moment passed. Dokul looked down at the blade in his bloodied gut. Torchlight licked off his bald scalp. He would go down to his knees and *die* here, and by Alumn, it would finally be over.

Dokul grasped the sword's edge, lifted his head, and grinned. Eroan hadn't counted on that and Dokul knew it. The bronze yanked, pulling Eroan forward, off-balance, and then his free hand had hold of Eroan's arm, squeezing, twisting, threatening to break bone through sheer force alone.

Eroan slammed the first blade in, wedging it into Dokul's side. The dragon barely blinked. And now they were close. So close, his wet breath blasted Eroan's face and the stench of him crawled down Eroan's throat.

“I expected more from you, the infamous Eroan Ilanea. I’ve lived countless centuries and you think a few cuts from dragon’s teeth blades can bring me down?”

Both blades were now lodged in the dragon’s muscle and sinew. If Eroan had any chance of escaping, he had to give them up.

He let go and grabbed for Dokul’s neck. Dokul shoved him out at arm’s length, his grip on Eroan’s arm like a vise, and laughed. With his free hand, he pulled the blade in his side free and turned its point on Eroan’s chest, freezing Eroan still.

“You’re too late, you know.” Dokul chuckled.

Eroan scrabbled at the man’s arm, sinking his nails in, trying to writhe free. Seraph’s sobs filled the quiet around Dokul’s laughter. There would be a way out of this, there had to be. The blade dragged down his chest, slicing leather and flesh. Eroan clenched his jaw and fixed the dragon in his glare. “I was forged in the fires of Ifreann for this, dragon. Pain fuels me.”

“Pain? There are many kinds of pain, elf. For example, I took your beloved dragon’s eyes.”

The tip of the blade dug in above Eroan’s hip, parting skin, sinking deeper. Eroan breathed around the flash of heat, weathering it, denying it purchase. Deeper, the blade pushed, fuzzing Eroan’s vision.

“He won’t get far, and he’ll come crawling back to me, just like this one...” Dokul turned, dragging Eroan with him.

Akiem wasn’t on the floor where he should have been.

A howl filled the air—a thunderous thing, it shook the metal walls and floors, barreling through the ship. Eroan had never heard such a sound, not from a man, and not from a dragon either. The howl belonged to Akiem. The black prince came out of the dark and slammed into Dokul from behind. The bronze barely moved, but as he turned, a snarl rippling his lips, Akiem kicked out, jolting Dokul back another step toward a hole in the deck—dragging Eroan with him.

Dokul’s back foot disappeared inside and the hole swallowed the bronze down. Dokul’s iron grip on Eroan’s arm pulled him down into the dark. The ship tipped out around him. His stomach swooped, the wound in his gut tearing. His heart lodged in his throat. He was falling... falling down and down—

A hand snatched his. Warm fingers locked. Eroan jolted to a stop. Wrenching waves of pain snapped down his back. Dokul’s weight clung to

his ankle, *pulling*.

“Hold on!” Akiem brought his free hand in and clutched both around Eroan’s, but Eroan’s fingers were slipping through the dragon’s grip.

Below, Dokul’s snarls and growls filled the nothing space. The burden of his weight was too much. Pain thudded and throbbed, trying to smother Eroan in unconsciousness.

“Hold on, elf.” Akiem heaved, trembling, trying to pull Eroan back, but it wouldn’t be enough. Dokul was too heavy, Eroan too weakened.

His vision fogged, the dark folding in.

“Get her out,” Eroan breathed. “Make sure... she’s safe.”

Akiem snarled, dragonsight bright in his eyes. “*Eroan*, you will not let go!”

Was this the first time the black prince had said his name? He couldn’t recall, but it felt like it. A small victory then, in these last moments.

Dokul’s grip vanished.

Akiem fell back, dragging Eroan with him. Cold metal had never felt so damned good. Eroan lay stunned, everything throbbing and bleeding and beating hot. He should have died. Why had Dokul let go?

“He’s shifting.” Akiem scrambled to his feet and ran for Seraph. He tore her chains free, snapping the links, sending them scattering, and hauled her to her feet. “Eroan, run!”

Magic. It sizzled the air, made his skin itch, and stole the air from his lungs. Metal screamed and groaned. The floor heaved, jolting Eroan to his feet. He stumbled toward Akiem’s shape ahead, grasping at the walls as they *moved*. Metal howled its terrible death throes and the ship tilted. The floor lifted, turning into a wall, sliding Eroan sideways. He skidded down bare metal and landed on his feet, but ahead, Akiem had fallen with Seraph. A crack danced down the passageway, severing the path to Akiem. Water roared somewhere around them and then the dragon’s roar made all that seem like nothing as it tried to shatter Eroan’s skull.

Water blasted up through the gap. Eroan ran, leaped into the spray, and landed hard on the other side, tumbling to his knees. “Go, go, go!” he urged Akiem. Corridors twisted and turned, splitting open, pulling apart, coming undone at the seams. Rivets popped like gunshots. Akiem had Seraph over his shoulder and ran hard, skidding off walls as they warped and twisted into floors.

The passage ended in a wall of metal and a bubbling pool of churning water.

A dead end. No way out.

Eroan turned to go back. Bronze scales slithered past the opening they'd just passed through, sealing them in. A huge dragon eye filled that same gap, the yellow eye dilating, pinning down his prey.

"The water. Go!" Eroan barked.

"We'll drown," Akiem hesitated.

Dokul's huge dragon foot punched in, claws expanding. Metal peeled open, unleashing more waves of water. There would be nothing left of this ship and nothing left of them. The water was the only way.

Eroan dove into the hole, eyes pinched closed—the water was too full of silt to see through. A swirling current turned him around, pulling him upside down. He groped at jagged metal, running his hands around an opening big enough to push through. Kicking up, he broke the surface, gasping, and thrust out his hand to Akiem. "There's a way out. Whatever happens, don't let go."

Akiem clutched Seraph close. "Hold tight," he told her. She nodded, and Eroan's breath hitched at the sight of the dragon folding her into his arms. He'd keep her close. He trusted that, just as Akiem took his hand and trusted him to pull them both to safety.

"Deep breaths," Eroan said.

Akiem breathed in, his fear crackling his magic around him like a cloak of purple lightning.

The bronze screamed its fury, the sound skull-shatteringly loud.

Alumn, save us.

Eroan dove under, pulling Akiem and Seraph with him, not knowing if they'd resurface.

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CHAPTER 34



Lysander

THE RIVER SPAT him out *somewhere*. He heard birds and water lapping and the wind. But no dragons. That was good. Weakened and blinded as he was, they'd attack and kill him. King or no.

He lay too long in the mud, wondering if he was in fact dead and this was some kind of torturous afterlife. His eyes throbbed, or rather, the empty sockets did. He groped around the bloody holes with trembling muddy fingers, finding nothing left to heal. The horror of it was too much to comprehend.

He shifted, but the darkness stayed. He'd hoped—he'd prayed to the Silver in his head, but the darkness had swallowed him and he couldn't escape it.

He beat his wings and took to the air, needing to move. Prey stayed still. He wasn't prey. Not yet. Blinded, yes, but his heart still beat, his wings still worked, his jaws could still crush.

Listening. Always listening. Higher, he climbed. Higher and higher where the air was cold and thin, but where the upper winds carried him along at a breathless rate.

Dokul had done this.

Vengeance spurred him on now.

He had a plan.

Sightless, he was as good as dead.

North was the only way, north to the dragon in the ice. But this time, he didn't stop for distractions, didn't slow for the sake of his flight. Alone, he flew and flew, always listening, always reaching out with his other senses, avoiding any hint of dragons nearby. This land was not known for its mountains, and as long as he could smell the sea and land, keeping himself in the middle, he knew his location.

North.

To the ice.

To the dragon who called his name.

Eroan would be looking for him.

He wanted to go back, but if he did that, Dokul would find them all. He had to do this. There was no other way. In the darkness, he'd find Alumn's light and bring it home.

He flew until the sun gave up and the air chewed at his wings, layering them in ice that cracked and fell with every wing beat. Hours felt like days, maybe they were. It hurt. Everything hurt. But *she* called, and the closer he came, the louder her calls were.

Finally, prince, she seemed to say. Finally, you are ready.

A storm buffeted him from all sides, forcing him to land. He plowed into the ground, raking off scales, and still the storm hassled him, making him walk in circles, he was sure of it. Trapped, his senses useless, he hunkered down and waited it out. Snowdrifts piled up around him, burying him in cold.

Eroan would come for him, but Eroan couldn't fix this. Only Lysander could fix this.

Wait for me, he silently told his elf. I'm coming back. Alumn, tell him I'm coming back.

Alumn was good. She was calm. But also strong. He knew this from his dreams, from Carline's stories, and he knew she was north. He knew it in his blood and in his heart. She was his final hope.

He prayed to her for Eroan, for Seraph. Begging her to keep them safe.

When the storm cleared, it left viciously cold air behind. He smelled only ice now. But he could hear her, feel her pulling like his dragons had. She wasn't far. He took to the air and struck rock soon after. Jagged cliffs tried to block his flightpath, but the higher he went to avoid them, the less he could breathe and the more laden with ice he became.

Maybe this had been wrong.

Maybe this had been a madness.

Eroan would think so. Was he safe somewhere? Was Seraph safe?

He flew full of sorrow and regret. When the rocks blocked him, he tried another route, another way. And when his wings could no longer hold him, he walked and walked and walked. Kept moving. Only prey stayed still.

What is this thing between us? It is everything.

Ice crunched under him, and deeper in the earth, rocks groaned.

He stopped, cocking his head to listen. Ice cracked like lightning underfoot, the splitting sound ricocheting in the snowbound quiet. Snow tapped its light fingers on his scales. This place was quiet. It was peaceful. And damned cold.

He heard it then. A gentle *thud-thud* beneath him. Another's heart.

This felt right.

But how to reach her.

He stoked the fire, stretched his battered and torn wings, lifted himself off the ice, and unleashed the flame below. Water bubbled. Steam hissed, sweating his scales. Ice snapped and screamed. But when it was over, little had changed. The ice rocked and swayed underfoot but still held him up.

More. He needed to unleash the flames and burn the world.

He scorched the frozen basin again and again, until his wings burned and his fire spluttered. But he couldn't rest. More. She had to be here. He stoked years of rage and abuse, used it as fuel, and unleashed his fury in the shape of flame, letting it feast on all the wrongs he'd endured.

Tell me you're here.

Tell me you're real and I haven't lost my mind.

Tell me there is hope.

He waited, listening, always listening.

Yes, came a reply.

He boiled the lake, and when that didn't work, he dove in and under the surface, clawing at the ice, looking for the light. She had to be here, because if she wasn't, if he were mad, then he'd left for nothing and he feared it was already over.

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CHAPTER 35



Eroan

THE MUD TRIED to pull him down with every step. He fell to a knee. Tiredness tried to pull him all the way down, but the dragon's howls behind drove him back onto his feet, forcing him to push on. Ahead, Akiem waded through the mud too, Seraph draped in his arms. He had refused to yield Seraph to Eroan, with a look in his eyes that warned Eroan not to push. Akiem had sniffed at the air and then let Eroan see the concern on his face. And so he hadn't pushed, mostly because the deep cut low in his belly beat hotly, numbing his hip and thigh. He knew mortal wounds. He'd delivered enough of them.

They made it to the bank as the enormous bronze broke from the shredded remains of the old ship and flung his wings open, spanning almost the entire river's width. He roared, spewing his fury in flame.

"Keep moving," Akiem said, drawing Eroan's wavering gaze.

The black prince had survived the ordeal relatively unscathed, although his wounds could have been concealed behind the mud, like Eroan's were.

Eroan nodded, afraid his voice would give away his weakened state. They made it to the long grass, but their tracks in the mud left an obvious trail.

"That way." Eroan nodded. Dokul would assume they'd head south, to Ashford. "We stay in the wetlands and make our way eastward." It might

take days to return to Ashford but if they stayed concealed, Dokul might lose them, making the longer trek worth the risk.

Sudden dragon screams added to the pounding in Eroan's head and he almost went down again.

"Down!" Akiem barked.

Eroan dropped and dug his fingers into the earth. The bronze sailed low overhead and freed an ear-piercing screech, declaring his prey found.

"Quickly," Akiem urged. He lowered Seraph to her feet. *"You must walk."*

She nodded but hadn't spoken a word. Her brittle glare found Eroan. She watched him climb onto unsteady legs. He tried to keep his head up for her, tried to smile away the pain, but wasn't sure if he succeeded. Akiem loomed in front of him suddenly. The prince caught Eroan's arm and slung it over his shoulders, supporting him.

They walked on, cutting low through the grass and sticking to the coast, moving away from Ashford, for now. Night seemed to blanket the land too soon, and without a fire, they huddled together, shivering as one. Still, Dokul's calls and fire lit up the night. This was a game, Eroan realized. Dokul toyed with them because he could. There were no dragon carcasses here to conceal their scent.

His teeth chattered. Pain ached through his jaws, into his skull.

"Eroan..."

The dragon prince peering down at him was the wrong prince. Eroan's vision blurred, turning Akiem into Lysander. He much preferred Lysander's half-smile and dazzling eyes.

"You're feverish."

A cool hand touched his cheek. Eroan closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of dragon, so like Lysander's. Lysander who Dokul had blinded. Lysander who had vanished. Not dead. He couldn't be. And so Eroan must continue, as Lysander would.

"I'm all right." He pushed the hand away and forced his shivering body to its feet. Morning light soaked over the land, bringing with it a blanket of heavy rain. They'd walked for hours, on and on and on. Eroan blinked at the horizon, expecting to see a forest, but saw only sand and grass. He had no idea where they were.

"We must turn south," Seraph said. *"His wound still bleeds."* Those words were meant for Akiem and not Eroan, but he heard all the same.

Eroan stumbled on. He looked down at his side. Red painted his hip and leg. It couldn't be blood, could it? He rocked, the ground shifting, dropping him on his ass. Maybe he'd just sit here a while.

A sudden blast of wind tore off the land, whipping Eroan's hair in front of his face, briefly blinding him. Then he heard the deep breaths belonging to dragon and cracked an eye open to see the hideous creature land atop the mound. The bronze lifted its head and roared its victory at finding them. His golden eyes sparkled. Teeth flashed.

Eroan had no more fight to give. His eyes fluttered closed, too heavy to keep open. Strange that now, in these moments, he heard his parents' voices when he'd so long thought them forgotten. All those years ago they had told him to run—to run and run, and he'd never stopped. He had run into the storm, leaving behind the only life he'd known, until finding a new one when an old, scarred elf had found him. Curan.

Curan was dead now too.

They all died, in the end.

Akiem's steely hands grabbed Eroan's arms and shoved. "Go! I'll hold him off. Run, damn you, Eroan, *run!*"

Seraph's little hand found Eroan's and pulled. Running in that moment might have been the hardest thing he'd ever done. The wetlands and dunes undulated, tripping them both, or maybe just him and he pulled Seraph to the ground with him. They fell a fifth time and Eroan's body refused to cooperate again. He tried. But the throbbing wouldn't stop. He was so damn tired.

"Please..." Seraph's tear-streaked face filled his vision. He remembered when she was small, dancing with pointed sticks. She'd ambushed him once, tried to take his feet out. He laughed at her. She told him later it was his mocking laughter that had driven her to fight. And she'd never stopped fighting. "Please, Eroan. You have to get up." She pulled and tugged at his arm.

Dragons snarled and roared close behind him, their battle sounding like the earth itself was coming apart. In a blur, he saw the black prince stand against the bronze. Dokul was twice his size. Twice as powerful. But Akiem was faster. His tail lashed, zipping through Dokul's scales, and as the bronze snapped at that lethal whip, Akiem raked his claws along the bronze's neck. Blood and fire rained.

“Please...” Seraph clutched his face. “Eroan, please move.” She sobbed now and it broke his heart to see those tears.

When he touched the wound in his side, his trembling hand came glistening red. The wound wasn’t healing. He was bleeding to death. That’s why he was cold, that’s why he just wanted to lie in the grass and sleep. He knew all the signs. He’d spent his whole life chasing death and now it was here, right beside him.

His head lolled, eyes rolling.

“Damn you Eroan Ilanea! You do not die here!” Her small hand slapped his cheek, lighting his face on fire. She grabbed him by the shoulders and heaved. “Move!”

He stumbled into motion and it seemed like, for a few moments, they’d be all right. Seraph steered him south and Ashford would be waiting for them. It was a long way, but that didn’t matter to his addled mind. One step. Another. He could do it.

The huge bronze dragon blocked his way. Its scales rattled. It lifted its head and there the fire raged in its firepit, bubbling up its throat. Then this was the end. Killed by a dragon, a true Order death. He’d been right, assassins didn’t live long enough to retire. He’d been a fool to think so, a fool to hope there might be more for him, that he could have had a life with his dragon prince.

A storm of black slammed into Dokul, claws extended, wings black, striking for the crown. Only the bronze was too big, too formidable. He flung Akiem off him and into the mud. Akiem’s huge wings flapped, but the mud had a hold of him, trying to suck him down, and Dokul saw it too.

“Oh no,” Seraph whispered.

Dokul’s glare fixed on the struggling prince.

Seraph started pulling Eroan away. Carefully. Slowly.

Akiem screamed his fury and thrashed. He got his wings free, but the mud still clutched his hind legs. Dokul rushed in and struck, his jaws clamping around Akiem’s neck in a vicious bite. The bronze’s vast weight pushed Akiem back into the mud. Deeper and deeper. Akiem clawed and thrashed, sinking faster.

Eroan knew he should run. Akiem was dying here, to save them, and if he didn’t run, it’d all be for nothing, but he couldn’t look away. Dokul tore great chunks of muscle and scale free, opening up Akiem’s veins, spilling blood into the river so it swirled around them, turning the tidal waters red.

Dokul crushed Akiem's crown in his jaws, but not to kill, to smother. He shoved Akiem down, burying his head below the surface. Fire boiled the water, turning it to steam. Akiem's tail lashed wildly, one semi-free wing flapped, and then that wing slowed, and the tail fell limp. The boiling water fell still.

Akiem didn't move again.

Eroan tried to run then, stumbling through the grass and over the hill, disappearing inside a copse of trees, hidden in shadow. He ran as Dokul roared, ran until the rain hammered out all sounds of dragon, ran until the grass turned to ferns and the land climbed toward the moors.

"I can't..." When he went down this time, there would be no getting up.

Rain patted his face and that was good, because Seraph wouldn't see his tears.

Seraph tore at his jacket, ripping it open, and he let it happen, already knowing what she'd find inside. The wound wasn't large, but it was deep, and fatal. It didn't clot because the blade had found some vital part of him and cut it open. It was a miracle he'd survived this long.

Cool hands smothered the wound, trying to stem the flow. "I can stop this. I just..." Her head whipped from side to side, searching for something, but they were alone. There was no way to save him.

Eroan smiled. It didn't hurt so much now. He lifted a hand and cupped her wet cheek, smearing blood there. "There is nothing to be done. You're safe. That's all that matters. Leave. Go to Ashford. Dokul can't get inside. The Order will kill him."

"I'm not leaving." She sobbed. It wasn't the rain wetting her face either.

He used his thumb to brush her tears away. "Don't let the hate for what happened here consume you."

"Eroan, please..." Her eyes shone. "Just tell me how to stop the blood." Her mouth pulled down in a grimace.

"Don't ever lose your smile." He tried to thumb her smile back into place.

"Stop it! Just stop it!" She thumped at his chest. "You can't leave me." Another thump. "It's not fair. You're not supposed to..." She bit her lip, trying to stop it from quivering and then fell over him, her little arms and body smothering him. He smelled home about her, the pine and freshly cut wood of his favorite places. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he was

among that forest again, running through the canopy, freedom in his lungs and beating through his heart.

“Lysander will need you,” he whispered, stroking her hair. His voice had cracked when he’d said Lysander’s name.

“Don’t. I can’t—” She shoved off him and scrambled back. “Assassins never give up! You’re giving up! You can’t.” She sniffed. “Never give up, *until it is done.*”

But death doesn’t let you finish things. He’d sent dozens to their deaths in the Dragon Queen’s tower. Life hadn’t let them finish either. Assassins didn’t get to retire.

“Get up.” She pulled on his arm. “Get up. Ashford isn’t far. They’ll see us. They’ll come. Just get up!” She tugged and pulled on his arm.

He couldn’t. It was over.

Seraph screamed, sending her cry far, and when that resulted in nothing, she sobbed into her hands.

Sniffing, she bared her teeth. “Do you think Lysander would just lay there?!” She yelled. “Do you think he’d just give up? He never gives up. Ever. He’s out there now and you know he’s fighting to come back, so you had damn well better fight to be here for when he returns. Fight! It’s what you do best.” She scooped an arm under his shoulders and heaved him upright.

“Seraph...”

“Shut up.” Now she took his arm, looped it around her shoulders and heaved. “Alumn, you’re heavier than you look.”

Impossibly, he was on his feet and moving. A few steps, a pause, a few more. They staggered and stumbled, always moving up and forward. A step seemed to take an hour, a yard a day. He didn’t know anymore. His consciousness was a dreaming thing, difficult to grasp a hold of and pin down.

“Ho!” a female called.

Seraph’s body shuddered at the sound. “The Order! They see us! We’re safe, Eroan. They’re coming...”

Eroan smelled metal and sweat and dragon. Wrongness.

Fear shoved steel rods through him. He tore Seraph from him and shoved. She stumbled to the side. Elves were rushing in. Ashford’s sentinels. Venali among them.

Seraph whirled, the shock on her face turning to fear.

Dokul's broad arm folded around him. The dragon wrapped him close, his body hot and harsh, swallowing Eroan's trembling in his embrace. One of the lost dragonblades kissed Eroan's throat.

The sight of Venali and the others blurred beneath rain and tears. So close... They'd almost made it. Dokul had known. He'd stalked them for days now, toyed with them, teased them to within a few strides of Ashford. The bronze had allowed him to get this far. In truth, he was already dead.

"Let's see how much your kind truly love Eroan Ilanea," Dokul said. The words wet Eroan's cheek.

Rain fell hard, streaming down Eroan's face and blurring his view of the Ashford elves as they formed a protective line. Eroan might have told them to shoot because he was dead anyway, but the blade at his throat trapped his voice.

Sentinel Venali with his distinctive red hair stepped from the line. "We have ballista trained on you, dragon. Release Eroan and we'll allow you to walk away."

Don't, Eroan thought. Don't bargain with him. I'm dead whatever happens.

Dokul chuckled. "Your arrows cannot harm me. Where's your leader? Where's that skinny bastard Alador?"

Don't. He wants you exposed.

Eroan's watery gaze flicked to Seraph standing where he'd shoved her. The maddened look in her eyes was a culmination of everything she'd been through. She'd try to attack Dokul and get herself killed.

Don't. He tried to convey it in his glare to them all. All they had to do was walk away. Eroan would die but they'd all be safe. That fate had always awaited him.

"Dokul," Alador's voice drew Eroan's attention back to the elves. The elder assassin stood tall, a pillar of strength and pride. "You are surrounded and outnumbered."

"You want this one." Dokul clutched Eroan tighter, making the gut wound renew its throbbing. "This one is special. Fuck knows why. I wonder if he started it all. Elisandra's death, Lysander's rise and fall. It all began when the queen caught him instead of killing him. How many of your elves have died since then?"

"How many of your dragons have died since you had Eroan in chains?" Alador replied. His eyes narrowed. "Look around you, dragon. You're

alone. The pyres behind me still burn with your dead kin. You've lost this battle and you're losing this war. Release Eroan and walk away."

Dokul stiffened, his body turning to rock around Eroan. "Where's Lysander?"

"Not here."

The bronze scoffed. "I blinded him. Where else would he go but back to the elves?"

The line of sentinels stirred, losing patience.

Alador lifted his chin. "What do you want, Dokul?"

"For you to watch as I gut him."

Dokul's arm opened and without the support, Eroan dropped to his knees. The blade was gone from his neck, but it hadn't gone far. He saw it in the eyes of his people, saw the reflection in Seraph's gaze. Dokul had raised the blade behind him.

The elves drew their arrows. Bows creaked, strings taut. They may miss, or they may find their target and Dokul would laugh. And still he'd open Eroan's insides.

Eroan would die, Dokul would shift, and nothing would change. He'd been so close to making things different, making them better, but in the end, the war would go on, elves and humans would die, and the dragons would reign.

He lifted his face to the rain. *Alumn, all of this—the pain, the blood, the sacrifice—for nothing?*

In his delirium, he heard a smooth voice reply, *Not for nothing, stubborn elf. For this...*

A dragon's call sailed across the land. It didn't sound like the others. The shriek was sharp and cold and piercing, like a knife to the heart.

"Ready the ballistae!" the elves responded.

Eroan blinked. Dark clouds churned overhead. A glimmer of silver flashed through the rolling rainstorm. It had been so quick, he must have imagined it.

The cry sounded again. "Alumn?" Seraph whispered.

Eroan lowered his gaze to her and to where she watched Dokul step back, and back again. Turning, Eroan saw how Dokul watched the skies, his face a myriad of horror. His grip opened and the dragonblade fell.

Seraph sprang.

"Don't!"

She scooped up the blade and brought it around, blocking Dokul's retreat. "That cut on your neck was a promise, *dragon*," she said. "For Xena, for Lysander, for everyone you've hurt and killed! I'm an Assassin of the Order, and I will never rest, *until it is done!*"

Dokul's outline erupted, magic spewing outward, snapping and lashing everything in its path.

Eroan made an ill-timed grab for Seraph, to pull her back and away from the onslaught, but his weak fingers never made it. He saw it happening, saw the beast's body start to unravel.

Dokul wasn't watching Seraph or him, he looked up, at the skies *behind* Eroan, seeing something that had the Bronze chief too terrified to care about Seraph.

She seized the moment. As quick as a whip, she flung the sword, setting it free. It streaked through the air and would have struck the dragon in the heart had he still been man. But the shift swallowed the chief's body and the sword, exploding his mass outward. The weight of Dokul's true form smothered Eroan in dull bronze scales.

Bronze crushed against him. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move, and all he could see was how, in the end, all his promises to protect Lysander had come to nothing.

Silver flashed, pouring down from the skies, slamming into Dokul, smashing him backward, raking his still-shifting body across the ground. A storm of dragonscale and dirt blasted high.

Air rushed into Eroan's lungs. He coughed up dust and wheezed while searching the clouds of grit for Seraph. She had to be here, she had to be safe. He scanned ahead but couldn't see her.

A huge Silver dragon had set upon Dokul. The beast was as smooth and sharp as any of Eroan's most lethal blades. Instinct told him she was female—and she was *beautiful*. She ripped into Dokul, snapping and tearing with long, needle-thin teeth. Dokul wasn't fighting back. He'd hunkered down in the dirt, clamping his wings in, making himself small. He snapped at her, but she was too fast, a jagged flicker of lightning striking again and again.

And then Eroan saw the reason for Dokul's hesitance. The sword Seraph had thrown had lodged in Dokul's throat, nicking the firepit, making liquid flame drip free. He couldn't spew flame at the attacking Silver. And her strength clearly matched his.

Wherever the dragon had come from, whoever she was, she was killing the Bronze chief.

A shaft of sunlight broke through the cloud cover above. Emerald scales glinted, lifting Eroan's wavering gaze. An emerald dragon with a broken crown chased that shard of light toward the ground.

"Lysander..." the name fell from his lips as hope leaped in his chest.

The Silver dragon looked up and pulled back, *yielding* her prize.

Hands grabbed at Eroan. His name spoken close to his ear. No, no, he needed to see this. Lysander... Lysander had come! He shook them off and fell to his hands and knees. Numbness thudded through his head, trying to pull his whole body under, but he had to look up, to *see*—even if it was the last thing he did.

Where the emerald's beautiful eyes had shone before, horrible wounds gaped. Then it was true, Dokul had mutilated him, but he was here, he was alive. He'd survived. The dragon prince who never quit. The prince who had cut *Eroan's* ropes in the tower so long ago, setting him free in all ways.

He wasn't pulling up.

Why wasn't he pulling up?

The dive was too fast. Too steep.

A shout caught in Eroan's throat.

He'd surely slam into the ground.

Alumn... save him.

The Silver dragon let loose a world-shattering shriek and at the last moment, Lysander threw open his wings and extended his claws. Emerald slammed into bronze. Dokul's back buckled and the big metal roared in pain, then spun. But Lysander clung on, claws sinking in, clamping his jaws around the back of Dokul's skull, trapping him beneath him.

Seraph screamed, "Fire!"

She was close. Safe.

Eroan's heart stuttered. The numbness robbed him of his hearing, making his heart thump too loudly, drowning out everything else.

Ballistae lances flew in, striking the bronze, only the *bronze*, and Eroan's pride swelled, choking him. His people had finally gotten it right.

The bronze was pinned, crushed beneath Lysander, bleeding from his firepit, lances driving into his neck, chest, and snout. They'd won. Dokul was dying, and Lysander would finally have his freedom.

Eroan fell and when he blinked, fighting off the fog, he saw Dokul's last moments and Seraph's victory. Yes, this was how it should be. Lysander and Seraph would go on. They'd have each other. They'd survive.

His lashes fluttered closed. He didn't hear the battle, didn't feel the pain, but he saw the dragon's silvery light and felt her warmth wrap around him. It felt safe. It felt like coming home.

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CHAPTER 36



Lysander

THE KILL. He knew nothing else, just the urge to crush Dokul's skull and rip him open, but the flight north and back had cost him much. His jaws shuddered, muscles screaming their agony. Everything hurt. He'd had enough strength left to dive and he'd been sure to make that dive deal the killing blow. Alumn's cry at the last second had only saved him from what would have been a crippling impact. An impact that *had* crippled Dokul. The chief's back had shattered. And now Lysander had him beneath him. The bronze was weak, he could smell death. He bled and panted and grunted his weakness and Lysander savored every wrought breath, every shudder. *Die!* He levered his jaws closed. Dokul's skull cracked, bone snapping. The dragon jolted, twitching, and then with a final, brittle crush, the dragon's skull gave up and Lysander's teeth sank in, finally killing the monster that had haunted his dreams for too long.

Alumn roared for the years she'd been trapped, for the fight she'd never finished, and she roared for him, because Lysander had nothing left in him.

He stumbled off the carcass, blind and disorientated, until that sweet, wonderful scent of Eroan hooked into him, luring him forward. Then he smelled the blood. So much blood. And heard Seraph's sobs. He didn't need his sight to know her.

His heart sank.

Lysander bowed his head, brushing his chin close to the ground, bringing his head in slowly. He breathed in great lungfuls of elfen scent. They were everywhere, but there was only one he wanted to be close to.

A tiny hand touched his nose. Seraph. Her tears smelled like clean sea air. She guided him forward and there, on the ground, his chin brushed his elf. He smelled death. The shock choked him. It could not be. Not his Eroan. Never him. He nudged at the body, but it didn't rouse. But he smelled warm and soft.

Oh gods, he couldn't take it.

A whine started near his heart and found its way through his chest.

Not Eroan.

Never him.

What is this thing between us? *Everything*.

Eroan was everything.

Alumn, he'd returned too late.

He nudged the body, prompting him to wake again. If only he could see, he just wanted to see Eroan... to see him smile and say everything would be all right, because Eroan would always be with him. That had been the promise. Eroan would never give up. Not on the world, not on himself, and not on Lysander. Death had taken him too soon.

His whine grew louder. It came from that place next to his heart, where the magic throbbed. The real heart of him. It hurt, by nights, it hurt so bad he couldn't breathe around it.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry," Seraph's little voice tumbled. "I tried, Lysander. I tried to keep him safe for you. I knew you'd come back. You always come back. And he knew it too, but it was... too much. I couldn't stop the blood..."

He huffed, filling his lungs with the smell of home, of his elf. Feeling around, he curled his claws around the body and tucked Eroan against his chest. His elf had slept against him in the meadow. He thought of that quiet, gentle time now. He'd keep Eroan safe from the world that hadn't deserved him, safe beneath his wing where nobody could hurt him again.

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CHAPTER 37



Eroan

ALUMN TOLD him it wasn't done and he told her he'd done enough. But that wasn't the end of it. His skin tingled like it had when he'd woken from the lashings, it tingled like it did when Lysander's fingers caressed and teased. He blinked at the dark but found it wasn't all dark where he lay, just diffused and warm. Sitting up, he probed absently at the rip in his jacket. Dried blood flaked off in his hands. He poked inside, fingers touching his skin, searching for the deep cut. But his skin was smooth. The wound had healed. He lived. He wasn't sure how, not yet, but he breathed and his heart beat...

And a dragon smothered him, but the dragon was his.

A wing canopied above, sealing Eroan inside a tiny, quiet haven, tucked in close against warm scales. Lysander's huge heart stuttered a ragged beat in the dark. Eroan ran his hand over the nearest scale. Lysander's breaths labored. The scales were rougher than Eroan remembered, scarred in dirt and dust. Some bore deep scratches and missing chunks. Eroan stroked over those he could reach and then roamed his hands down Lysander's jaw.

The ragged eye socket bore the ugly truth of Lysander's sacrifice and Eroan's chest hollowed out to see it.

"Did you save me again, dragon?" he whispered.

Lysander harrumphed. Then the purr kicked in and Eroan plastered himself against Lysander's scales. "I am so sorry."

In response, Lysander tightened the nook between leg and wing he'd trapped Eroan in.

Eroan pressed his forehead against a scale. "I failed you."

Lysander's growls bubbled. Whether he agreed or not, it was the truth. Dokul had gotten to Lysander again and taken his sight. The brute's death was not enough. Eroan would kill every dragon who wronged Lysander, and it would never make up for it.

"Akiem..." Eroan squeezed his eyes closed and spread his hands on the warm scales. Akiem had wronged Lysander in so many ways, but in the end, he'd fought for Eroan and Seraph. "Your brother is dead. He died protecting Seraph and I."

Lysander's breathing hitched. He snuffled closer to Eroan, seeking the touch, and Eroan answered by running his hands down his snout.

"Is Seraph all right?"

Lysander grunted and slowly lifted his wing off, unfurling away from Eroan, revealing the waiting elves. Seraph ran at him like a battering ram, flung herself into his arms and cried against his shoulder. She trembled like a tiny thing. He folded her in close, holding her heart-to-heart and swallowed around the great swell of emotion. He'd never been prouder of anyone and more honored than to have her as a friend.

The embrace lasted a minute before she suddenly pulled herself free and glared. "Eroan Ilanea, don't you ever fucking die on me again."

A few of the sentinel guards chuckled and then fell silent as she swung them all a withering look.

Eroan cleared his throat and fought to hide his smile. He rubbed at his face, dislodging mud and dried blood. The afterglow of being healed buzzed through him but exhaustion still lingered, and behind him, Lysander was still hurting. "Dokul is dead?" he asked, voice gruff and raw.

Seraph nodded. "And there's a... there's someone..." She waved a hand, urging Eroan to look behind her.

Eroan stepped around Lysander's bulk and blinked at the enormous Silver dragon resting on the grass. Her scales looked sharp enough to cut, each one carrying a lethal razor's edge but there was a kindness to her dark eyes. A kindness he recognized.

I heard you, elf.

I heard you all.

He glanced back and assumed from the alarm running rampant through the faces of the sentinels, they all heard the same voice in their heads.

The Silver's outline shimmered, turning molten, and from her bulk, the Silver coalesced into the form of a tall, lithe female. Her ears were tipped, like an elf's. She wore a gown of glittering white, frosted in silver lace. Her hair lay bundled in a single, plump braid.

Eroan blinked. He knew her name.

Every elf here knew her name.

But she was... *dragon*?

She glided forward, walking elf-light through the grass. "Your prayers did not go unheard. I listened. Crushed beneath the dark and the cold, I listened to you all, my children."

He knew her. He knew her like he knew himself. She was the light that guided them all. She was Alumn.

She drew closer and some of the elven line fell to their knees. Eroan just stared. He'd never seen so fine a beauty, but it wasn't a soft beauty, her appearance was too sharp, too bright, too cutting. There could be no doubt she was divine. And dragon.

Her smooth hand settled lightly on his head and her healer's touched spilled through him, so similar to Lysander's. "For hundreds of years, I listened to you all. I heard your cries and cried with you. I felt your grief and grieved with you. You were never alone, my elves. But I could not reach you."

She tilted Eroan's chin up. Her light warmed his veins, bringing him alive and chasing away the hollow aches, as though he'd been basking in the sun all day.

"Long ago, we fought, the Bronze and I. I fell to him then. And lost, I waited far below the ice where no elf could reach me. Only dragonfire could do that. The bronze slaughtered my emeralds, my healers, each one my attempts to make things right. All failed... All but Lysander."

Alumn turned her attention toward Lysander. He lay tucked tightly into himself, his head down, tail curled close, and his breathing stuttering. Exhaustion showed in every tremor and broken scale.

Never had anyone suffered as much and continued to fight.

Heal him, Eroan begged, and then aloud, "You can." Her being here felt as impossible as a dream, but if it was fantasy, he couldn't wake, not yet.

She had to heal him, didn't she?

"Alumn," he said, calling her by her true name, knowing it was right. Her kind eyes met his. "Please?" he asked.

She approached Lysander. He didn't recoil, didn't growl, didn't do anything, and Eroan knew Lysander's hurt was soul deep. It would take time to heal it all, but if she could bring back his sight, he'd help Lysander heal the rest.

Her light hand touched his nose and her shimmering glow expanded, rippling over his scales, making them shine anew. Higher, the light licked, until it reached his eyes, he groaned and dug his snout into the ground, trying to bury himself away from the pain.

"Be still, dragon," she chided. "There is much hurt to heal. I owe you my freedom, and thus you shall have yours."

The elves observed. There were more of them now, lured from Ashford by the presence of their goddess, their light—as she healed a dragon.

Emerald eyes glowed. Lysander blinked. Dark pupils blew wide. His eyes blazed, their shocking green piercing straight to Eroan's heart.

"There. Now, rest." She backed away and addressed the elves. "All of you, rest. There is work to be done, but first, rest and heal. Your skies are clear. You are safe." She walked back the way she'd come, passing Eroan, and shifting back to dragon before taking to the skies where she soared, keeping a watchful eye on her elves below.

Eroan had witnessed a miracle. Word would soon spread. Alumn was dragon, and that changed everything. Elves, dragons, and humans. They were all more alike than anyone could have known, and they needed each other. Doubt would spring up. Those who hadn't seen would dismiss it. But those challenges could wait.

He lifted his gaze to meet Lysander's, tracing the slip of a single tear as it fell from the dragon's eye.

It was over.

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CHAPTER 38



Lysander

EROAN HAD BEEN right and wrong. It was over, but it had also just begun. Dokul was dead, the elves had burned his remains, using Eroan's firestarter to start the blaze, and Lysander had watched on. Elves searched the estuary shore for Akiem's body, but none was found. Any wayward dragons, Lysander swept under his wing, controlling them and leading them away from Ashford, away from all elves. Alumn was ever-present and yet not. There and gone again, like a dream with a mind of her own. And her mind was set to peace, although she hadn't said how. After her appearance, the elves queried if she was what she appeared, but any who saw her knew the truth. She *was* truth. And she was both dragon and elf. Not even stubborn elves could argue with that.

The cleanup took time and the trek back to Eroan's nameless village took time. Time Lysander spent as dragon. He patrolled and watched and protected all those he'd taken under his wing: human, dragon, and elf alike. He needed to be dragon for a while. Being dragon was less... complicated.

When Eroan's villagers decided some revelry was in order, Lysander shifted back to man, and stood on the fringes of their autumn revelry, watching them frolic and sing. Seraph was here somewhere. He saw her cropped hair and one missing ear-tip bob among the crowd of elves and humans. But in the last few days, he'd also seen her cry and let her tuck

herself under his wing. It would take time for everyone to heal, time they now had.

Across the village square, Eroan appeared from the far side of the revelry. Someone hooked his arm and tried to pull him into dancing. He laughed them off and was saved by another wanting his attention. He mingled and laughed, and Lysander's heart swelled to see it. Eroan had found his home, and Lysander had too.

The folk music shifted into a jolly, uplifting beat. Elves started up their clapping. Junoe's lute plucked along and Seraph was soon beside him, the pair of them sharing sly glances. Lysander made a mental note to threaten him later.

Eroan appeared at Lysander's side, hooked his arm, and pulled him among the dancing crowd. It had been weeks since they'd touched as anything other than elf and dragon, but the heat hadn't faded.

Lysander purred. He'd been too long as dragon and cleared his throat. "I don't..." Eroan cut him off with a look. *All right then*, he smiled. He knew better than to argue with Eroan Ilanea.

"Dance with me, dragon." Eroan made it an order and Lysander arched an eyebrow.

He'd been watching the elves dance these past few days. He knew where to place his feet, and when to skip, and when to loop with your neighbor, taking on a new partner. He still marveled that any elf would dance with him, let alone clasp his hand and embrace him like he was one of their own. Perhaps it was because they knew he was their protector now. Or maybe knowing Alumn was dragon had enlightened them. Whatever the reason, he danced with them, his body full of music's sweet spell until he was back in Eroan's arms, the elf all smiles. He'd seen more of those smiles in the last few days than in the entire time he'd known him.

Unable to refrain any longer, Lysander pulled Eroan aside, barely making it three steps before yanking him into his arms so he could kiss that smile. Elves bumped against them, uncaring. Eroan molded himself close, tilting his hips in, luring Lysander's instincts from beneath the surface. Eroan laughed and turned his head away, further undoing Lysander's control. Presenting with the curve of his neck, Lysander nipped at the flushed skin. If he fell any further, there wouldn't be any stopping, and as carefree as these elves were when it came to sexual relations, they weren't dragons.

“There’s a hot spring nearby,” Eroan said against the corner of Lysander’s mouth. “A scout discovered it earlier this morning... No other knows of it. Tonight it’s all ours.”

Lust poured heat right where it was needed. Lysander swallowed. “And we’re waiting because?”

Eroan pulled him by the hand, leading him from the celebrations and beyond, where the torches marked the edge of the village, farther into the dark, before dropping down into a hidden gulley. Nestled at its center, a moonlit pool bubbled and steamed.

Eroan sauntered ahead, lifted his shirt off, and tossed it aside.

Lysander stumbled. The muscle-play riding Eroan’s shoulders and down his scarred back had Lysander forgetting his own name. He slowed, taking time to admire the elf’s narrow hips and rounded ass. Eroan unfastened his pants and let them fall from his hips, over his ass, and land in a pool at his feet. Moon-licked elf had to be one the most glorious sights Lysander had ever seen.

Eroan stopped at the pool’s edge, tossed a *fuck me* look over his shoulder, then plunged in, sliding like a knife below the surface. Lysander hurried to the pool, fumbling with his shirt, until finally tearing it off and balling it up. His pant ties vexed him. This was taking too long.

Eroan resurfaced with a gasp, his hair plastered down the sides of his face. His blue eyes gleamed with moonlight. The single green emerald earring winked.

“Do you plan on joining me today?” He swept his hair back, his smile a fucking tease. “Or shall I swim alone?”

Lysander growled. Words were beyond him. He finally unfastened the pants. Of course, he’d gone beyond the point of graceful and tried to shove them down, only for the belt to get hung up on the pounding erection.

Eroan’s laugh undid him.

Lysander tore the blasted pants off and dove over the edge, plunging deep below the warm, enveloping water. The pool went down and down, seemingly with no end. He opened his eyes beneath the surface and made out Eroan’s pale outline treading water above. Thanking Alumn once more for the return of his sight, he kicked forward, grasped the elf by the hips and licked from his navel, over the ripple of abs, up over one nipple, and broke the surface to gulp in air.

Eroan let him breathe, then hooked a leg around his, drawing him close. He nudged at Lysander's chin and his mouth became that hot, teasing thing, asking but not taking, teasing and not giving.

Lysander chased the promise of a kiss, letting Eroan set the pace. They shared breaths, barely touching, drawing out the moment to a thin point, ready to snap. Eroan's hand found Lysander's ass, keeping him close enough that the brush of Eroan's hip against Lysander's sensitive tip had him bucking like a rabid kit hunting down its first fuck.

Eroan's cock nudged at Lysander's lower belly. Gods, he loved this, the feel of Eroan erect and ready and his own savage arousal trapped between them. He wanted to lick him, take him and bite him and own him and fuck him and all the things dragons did, but right now, he'd be content to probe his mouth with his tongue and tease his lips.

The kiss wasn't so much a kiss as a dance of whispers and the lightest stroke of tongues, so fucking gentle Lysander had a rabid urge to clutch Eroan's cock and make him come in seconds. It was that or he was going to have to do the same with his own pounding need before it drove him mad.

Eroan's fingers found his balls and lifted, and as the elf continued to tease with his tongue, he reached down, swept behind Lysander's balls and slid a finger inside.

Lysander broke. He thrust a hand into Eroan's hair and devoured him in a rough kiss full of tongues and mouth and sharp elven teeth. Eroan threw his head back, luring Lysander to his neck and shuddered his pleasure. He'd braced against the rocks and now Lysander had him trapped against them. His fucking impossible elf. He caught Eroan's lean hips, too crazed to marvel at the feel of him in his hands, and ground against him, the water creating that sliding, frictionless pressure that had Eroan groaning and Lysander enraptured.

He must have stopped—which was impossible—but Eroan's lazy gaze roamed Lysander's face as Lysander admired his. He had perfect eyebrows and pale lashes framing eyes the color of a calm ocean, although they could just as easily rage and churn like a storm.

"You stopped," Eroan said.

"I'm thinking."

"Dangerous."

"Definitely." Lysander's heart hammered at his ribs. His body *wanted* so bad it was beginning to tear itself apart, the magic sizzling across his skin.

But still he waited, committing the exquisite detail of Eroan to his memory.

They hadn't talked about what had happened on the battlefield. With Alumn's arrival, and his sight being gone and then being healed, learning of Akiem's death, and moving back to this place, to their new home, there hadn't been time to talk about how Lysander thought Eroan gone for good. He'd thought Eroan had died before, but the battlefield, after Dokul, had been different. Eroan *had* died. Lysander wasn't sure, but he thought he'd maybe... brought him back, with Alumn's help. He'd never tried to heal as dragon before. But as Carline had healed his wing as dragon, Lysander had maybe done the impossible too.

"I lost you," he whispered, bracing an arm over Eroan's shoulder so he could brush the words against Eroan's ear. "You were gone. I felt it. You died and I..."

"Do not dwell on it."

Lysander clutched at Eroan's face. "Is this us now?"

Eroan puzzled, his sly smile falling away. "What do you mean?"

This wasn't the time to talk, but he needed to hear the words from Eroan, because they'd had moments before, but those moments had ended. Was this how it would be now? Eroan and him, dancing to elven songs, helping harvest plums from the trees, plucking carrots from the earth like some fucking paradise, living one moment to another, day by day. Lysander wasn't sure he deserved such peace.

"Never mind... I'm spoiling it."

Eroan's hand slid down Lysander's chest, fingers sweeping and digging in, hinting at where they may go next before veering away.

"You know you can talk to me." Serious words from an elf who had his hand brushing Lysander's cock.

The warm water soothed and lapped. "I know." Lysander teased Eroan's mouth, nipping and sucking, losing his concerns and himself in the feel of Eroan. Maybe, just maybe, this was how things were now. No more battles to fight, no more wars to rage. He could dream it in this moonlit pool with the elf he loved in his arms and finally make the dreams real.

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CHAPTER 39



Eroan

HE WAS SO FRAGILE A THING, his dragon. Strong and fierce and outright terrifying to some, but vulnerable in moments like these, the quiet, passionate moments none other but Eroan saw. In the moonlight and steam, Lysander was a dark gift, his long hair like oil on the water, his expression intense. Eroan knew what he feared, but time would ease his concerns. With every day his dragon would learn he was safe. Nobody could hurt him anymore. Eroan would tell him, but not now, now was for tasting, and feeling, and becoming one, tangled together in these warm waters.

They stayed until the moon had passed on. The village would have retired for the night hours ago. Steam rolled off Lysander when he climbed from the pool. Cold air nipped his tanned flesh, raising gooseflesh. In the pool, Eroan watched his dragon collect his clothes, grieving the loss of that warm body against this.

“Don’t tell Seraph of this place.” Lysander pulled his wet hair back and tied it in a dripping bun. “She’ll tell the lute player and I’ll be forced to deal with him the dragon way.”

“Delighted to, you mean.” Eroan propped himself against the edge, admiring Lysander from below, looking up his impressive muscular legs, hard thighs and tight ass until Lysander hid the sight behind tight elven

pants. That wasn't better. In fact, having him hidden only made Eroan want to unwrap him all over again.

"That too." Lysander paused and closed his hand around the carved dragon token at his neck. He never removed it. "We'll continue this in your house."

"*Our* house."

Lysander smiled, and dove back into the brush toward the village, disappearing from sight.

Eroan laid his head back on the water's surface. Stars silently blinked across a canvas of dark. The night was calm, serene, like Eroan's thoughts. There would come a time he'd ask Lysander about the future, about what they both could accomplish, if Lysander wanted to. But that would come. For now, the peace they'd found here would heal them both.

Slow handclaps ricocheted through the quiet like pistol shots.

One. Two. Three.

The approaching elf was difficult to see, even with Eroan's night-sensitive eyes. He wore black and moved silently, a shadow among shadows. Recognition stirred Eroan's memories. He'd known another who had moved just as stealthily through the night, but he was dead.

He came closer to the pool's edge, the night peeling off him and the dragonblade now in his hand.

Eroan's lip curled. "Nye." Impossible. The wound he'd dealt him had been fatal. He died in the mud where Eroan had left him. And yet, here he was.

"Ah, that shock on your face," Nye's moonlit smile stretched razor-thin, "it was worth it, just to see the great Eroan Ilanea surprised."

Eroan gripped the edge of the pool and scanned the brush, searching the dark for Lysander. He had no reason to return. He'd be back at the village, lighting a fire, waiting.

"Your dragon has left you all alone."

Eroan pinched his lips together. How had Nye lived and how had he found the sword? Seraph had claimed the one in Dokul's ashes. The other had been lost in the estuary. That had to be the one Nye now carried. And Eroan had nothing. No blades, no weapons, and his clothes lay scattered where he'd tossed them. He was... *exposed*. Vulnerability poured ice through his veins.

Nye crouched at the pool's edge. He narrowed his eyes. "What a precious thing it is to see fear in your eyes. The great Eroan Ilanea fears me. Maybe now you fucking see me, huh?"

A half-moon scar marked Nye's neck. Dokul's bite.

"How?" Eroan asked. "I left you to die."

"Perhaps Alumn answered my prayers as I lay dying on that riverbank. She healed you so why not me?"

"Lysander healed me."

Nye's smile was all white teeth in the dark. "Inch by inch I crawled out of the mud you left me in. I lay on the bank, vowing to find you with every breath. Days I stayed like that, clutching at life, wishing you dead. Eventually, I could crawl, then walk. I made my way home, to Cheen. Anye was most sympathetic. She really does hate you." Nye paused, letting the information settle. His cheeks had hollowed, his jaw hardened. Vengeance had stolen anything soft about Nye. "Death can't have me until I am done with you."

"And what is it you want with me, Nye?"

He stood and circled the sword's tip at the ground. "Get out."

Eroan swallowed. In the pool, he was as good as useless, but safe. For this to end, he needed to get out of the water and somehow retrieve the sword from Nye. But Nye wasn't some ill-trained fisher-folk. He was a damned good Order assassin.

Spreading his hands on the edge, he heaved himself up out of the water and rose, naked, to his feet.

Nye arched an eyebrow, his gaze roaming over Eroan's flushed skin, snagging on the new scar at his hip where that blade in Nye's hand had already killed him once. Eroan knew what Nye saw, he'd watched a similar sight when Lysander had climbed out of the water. But Nye's hungry gaze was unwelcome, like the Dragon Queen's had once been, like all the dragons' gazes had been as they'd admired him tied to a bed or locked in whipping stocks. Eroan wasn't chained now.

"Get a good look, Nye. I'll likely be the last thing you see."

"I've thought of you, every second of every day since you left me," he lifted the blade. "Not to save you, not anymore. I've counted all the ways I'd kill you." He stepped closer, hovering the tip of the blade over Eroan's heart. "It can't be quick, not for you." He pressed the tip against Eroan's skin, sparking a tiny burn of pain and a dribble of blood. The blade shifted

with Eroan's breaths. "You've destroyed everything I loved. You even destroyed our blessed Alumn by turning her dragon. I'm going to destroy everything you love. I'll start with your village and burn it like I did Cheen's tree. The humans that flee will be the next to perish beneath this very blade. Seraph dies after them, her crime that of loving a dragon. I'll make you watch. Make you hear her screams."

Eroan's breaths quickened, his heart too.

"And then I'll butcher the dragon prince. He'll die slow. A blade to the chest to stop him shifting and I'll take his fucking fingers for touching you, and then his eyes again, so he can't see you weeping for him."

Lysander might come still. Eroan flicked his glance to the brush behind Nye.

Nye's mouth twitched. "You are *nothing* without your dragon. So weak, you search for him even now."

The sword dug into Eroan's chest, wrenching a hiss from between his teeth.

"I admired you... My whole life I fucking worshipped Eroan Ilanea. I wanted to *be* you."

The blade shook, digging deeper, forcing Eroan back a step. If he lunged for the sword, Nye would drive it between his ribs.

He lifted his hands. "All right, Nye. You have me. I can't fight you. You win, you hear? You win. Isn't that what it's all been about? You've finally beaten me."

Nye's mouth twisted. "You even sound weak. And to think I loved you? You're pathetic."

The blade-tip jabbed. Eroan stepped back, bumping against a boulder, his retreat blocked. The blade sank deeper, shortening his breath. "The village then," he gasped. "Take me there. Show them you're stronger than I am."

Nye's stillness was unnerving. "I was going to," he said. "But now I have you here and at my mercy..." He wet his lips and dropped his gaze. "After watching you fuck *him*." Nye applied his free hand to the end of the sword's handle and pushed, holding Eroan back as he reached in and traced his fingers over Eroan's abs. "I've missed loving you."

The touch made Eroan's skin crawl. "You are not the Nye I remember." His chest burned, the cut at the sword's tip dribbling more blood. "You truly

think to force me after knowing my past? The Nye I knew and admired would never consider such a vile thing. Who are you now?"

His smile tilted but kept its edge. "I'm a dead thing. You made sure of that. Like you'll be dead inside when I am done with you."

A growl bubbled from the night, so deep it sounded as though it came from the earth itself.

Nye froze.

Eroan flicked a glance to the brush and the source of the growl. Two huge green eyes glowed in the dark. Eroan smiled. He was no longer alone.

Nye's eyes widened. He turned, taking the blade with him.

The emerald dragon with a broken crown raised his head out of the brush, towering tall. His lips peeled back, and the growl bubbled again, this time rumbling loud and free. Fire throbbed low in his throat.

Eroan grabbed Nye's sword-arm by the wrist, tore the sword free of his grip, and kicked out, sending Nye stumbling into Lysander's reach.

Nye gaped up, so small in front of Lysander's true form. "You!"

Lysander's dragon smile stretched wide. He opened his mouth, revealing huge curved glistening teeth.

"No!" Nye pushed his arms up, as though that might somehow protect him. He tried to turn, but not to beg—rage contorted his face. He sprang, murder in his eyes—for Eroan.

The dragonblade strummed in Eroan's hands, ready to find its mark.

Huge jaws snapped shut around Nye. Lysander threw his head back and swallowed.

Gone. It happened so fast, Eroan's thoughts had yet to catch up to the fact that Nye was no longer running at him. That Lysander had...

He should feel something, shouldn't he?

The sword tumbled from his hand. He fell against the boulder, needing its support.

Lysander's throaty growl bubbled again. The dragon king blinked huge, glassy eyes, waiting for Eroan to speak.

Eroan nodded. Words weren't needed. He couldn't speak them anyway, not yet.

It was finally done.

Lysander huffed, turned away and prowled toward the village, ruffling his wings and resettling his scales.

Alone beneath the stars, Eroan closed his eyes. He sighed out, steadied his thoughts and himself, and opened his eyes. This was how it would be now—Lysander and Eroan. Nothing could touch them just so long as they were together. And they would be together. Nothing could tear them apart.

He knelt at the pool, splashed the cut at his heart clean, and gathered his clothes.

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CHAPTER 40



Lysander

HE FEARED Eroan might hate him for what he'd done. But he needn't have. Eroan's nod had been a forgiving one.

That damned dark, vicious little elf had deserved it. A quick death, really. Some might even say honorable. What Assassin of the Order didn't want to die by dragon? Besides, elves were delicious.

Right after Lysander had finished-off Nye and returned to the house, he'd lit the fire and paced, wondering if he should go back and explain why he'd killed Nye like he had. He'd smelled the elf on leaving the pool and hung back to see if his suspicions were correct. Nye was supposed to be dead. The sight of him threatening Eroan had flipped Lysander to shift, and like he'd learned from the dragons in the north, he'd hidden low in the brush, watching to see if the elf tried to redeem himself. He hadn't. Lysander wasn't sorry. He'd kill him again, even if Eroan forbade it. He knew broken when he saw it, and Nye had been exactly that.

Eroan had returned to their house, taken up a chair by the fire and stayed there while Lysander teased the flames.

He waited for the argument to begin, for Eroan to scold him, berate him for being dragon. And this haven would all come to an end. Because if Eroan wanted Lysander to be different, he couldn't be. He was dragon, and if anyone touched Eroan, he'd by-fucking-diamonds well act like a dragon.

“Thank you,” was all Eroan said, his voice so low Lysander almost hadn’t heard him.

Lysander took his hand and guided him to bed, where his elf had lain tucked against his chest until his shivering subsided. He’d fallen asleep soon after, but Lysander stayed awake, keeping his elf close, watching the door for any who dared take him.

And so the days went on. Under Lysander’s protection, the village grew, expanding into fields and keeping stock. Alumn had vanished, or so the messengers said. She’d gone wherever she was needed, he was sure of that. There were whole other continents out there. More dragons and elves to save.

New elflings were born. Humans too. But Lysander forbade the dragons from reproducing, and any who did, he dealt with the dragon way. There were enough dragons in the world. His mental grasp of his flight reached far, growing stronger the more he used the power, until he was sure the entire land was safe, from horizon to horizon.

And then there was Eroan. Through the winter, he’d laughed less. Lysander often found him patrolling the village fringes, or sitting atop the rocky tors, watching the horizon. He guided his people when they came to him, but more and more, his people became settled and content in their village life, needing Eroan less. He’d retired from the Order and tutored Trey and Seraph to lead in his place. Lysander suspected it took more than words to retire. He couldn’t retire from being dragon, so how could Eroan retire from being who he was?

An elf like him wasn’t made to settle. He was made to fight, like a blade. And what was a blade good for if there were no more battles to fight? Old blades were hung on walls, pretty to look at, but they soon grew rusted and useless.

This evening was a fine one. No rain, but cool enough to make flight bracing. On the wing, Lysander spied Eroan atop a rocky tor. He blended in well against the stone. Lysander felt Eroan’s gaze sliding across his scales the same as he’d feel Eroan’s hands stroking over him.

He altered his course, rearing up mid-flight, and swooped in to circle around the elf’s rocky outcrop. After a few downdraft beats of his wings, he landed behind him and shifted.

“Do you think there are more humans out there?” Lysander asked, clambering over the boulder field to join Eroan sitting atop the biggest rock.

He'd waited a while before joining him, breathing in the quiet springtime air. From this vantage point, it seemed as though the whole world spread around them in every direction. The coast to the east, towers and wildness to the north, Cheen to the south, and to the west, well... who knew? The land looked green and undulated until a hazy horizon blurred the rest.

"Yes," Eroan finally answered. He wore a dark, untucked shirt, the kind that flapped in the wind. Laces unknotted and free. The wind teased with his hair too, tickling its unbound length across his shoulder and down his back. So different to the restrained, stubborn elf Lysander had first met chained in the queen's tower.

"Elves too?" he asked, kicking pebbles off the rocks, watching them skip over the edge.

"Ben said it was likely. While most elves were cut off from this land when the humans unleashed their weapon, there were others elsewhere."

Eroan finally looked over, and for a briefest moment, a longing made his gaze distant until those elven eyes sharpened on Lysander. "You asked me once if this was us now."

Lysander remembered it well. He smiled and looked down at the rocks they stood upon. Unmoving. Stable. This land would be here long after they had both moved on.

"Are you happy, Lysander?" Eroan asked.

He breathed in and admired the horizon. He could be happy here, or anywhere, just so long as he had Eroan. "I was."

Eroan's smile ticked, threatening to fail, but he clung onto it. "You were?"

Lysander tucked his thumbs into his pockets to keep from reaching out and pulling Eroan close. "We both needed healing. But you were never going to be content with village life, *Eroan Ilanea*. You need a purpose like I need to fly. Without those things we are half ourselves."

"You were never half a thing."

By nights, he couldn't hold back and plucked a hand free of his pocket to touch Eroan's cheek. And once he'd touched, he had to draw Eroan close. There was no resisting him. "I'm not happy, no," he told him, watching his face fall.

Eroan's brows pinched. "What are you saying?"

The press of him, so warm and hard, so very Eroan, it summoned a purr low in his throat. "I'm saying, yes."

Eroan's brows pinched tighter and Lysander almost laughed. By diamonds, he adored this male. "There's a whole world out there full of dragons and elves and humans." Lysander swept a hand, encompassing all they could see, and that which they couldn't. "Some people need saving. Some need eating. But I'm certain they all need an Eroan Ilanea. You are wasted here. You're not ready to put down roots. Any fool can see it. Any fool but you. You can't be caught, you can't be tied down, you can't be chained. Your spirit is too wild a thing." Lysander laughed. "You're *Eroan Ilanea*. You should go beyond that horizon, find new battles to fight, new wars to win, more people to save." Lysander almost kissed him. He was close enough to. He flicked his gaze up, marveling at the sparkle in Eroan's blue eyes. "It's who you are."

"Come with me," Eroan whispered, eyes searching Lysander's as though he truly feared Lysander might say no. Even now, Eroan couldn't see how much he was loved. Lysander would make it his life's mission to change that.

"I already answered, didn't I?" Lysander traced a thumb down over Eroan's lips and then brushed those lips with his own, falling into Eroan's spell. He'd go anywhere with Eroan, do anything for him, love him, protect him, be what he needed, because this was them now. Dragon and elf. Dragon King and Assassin of the Order. And nothing could stop them.

A home wasn't a place, it was a person, and Lysander had found his.

He withdrew from the kiss and bumped his forehead against Eroan's, losing himself in his elf's pretty eyes.

"Will you carry me across the ocean, dragon?" Eroan asked.

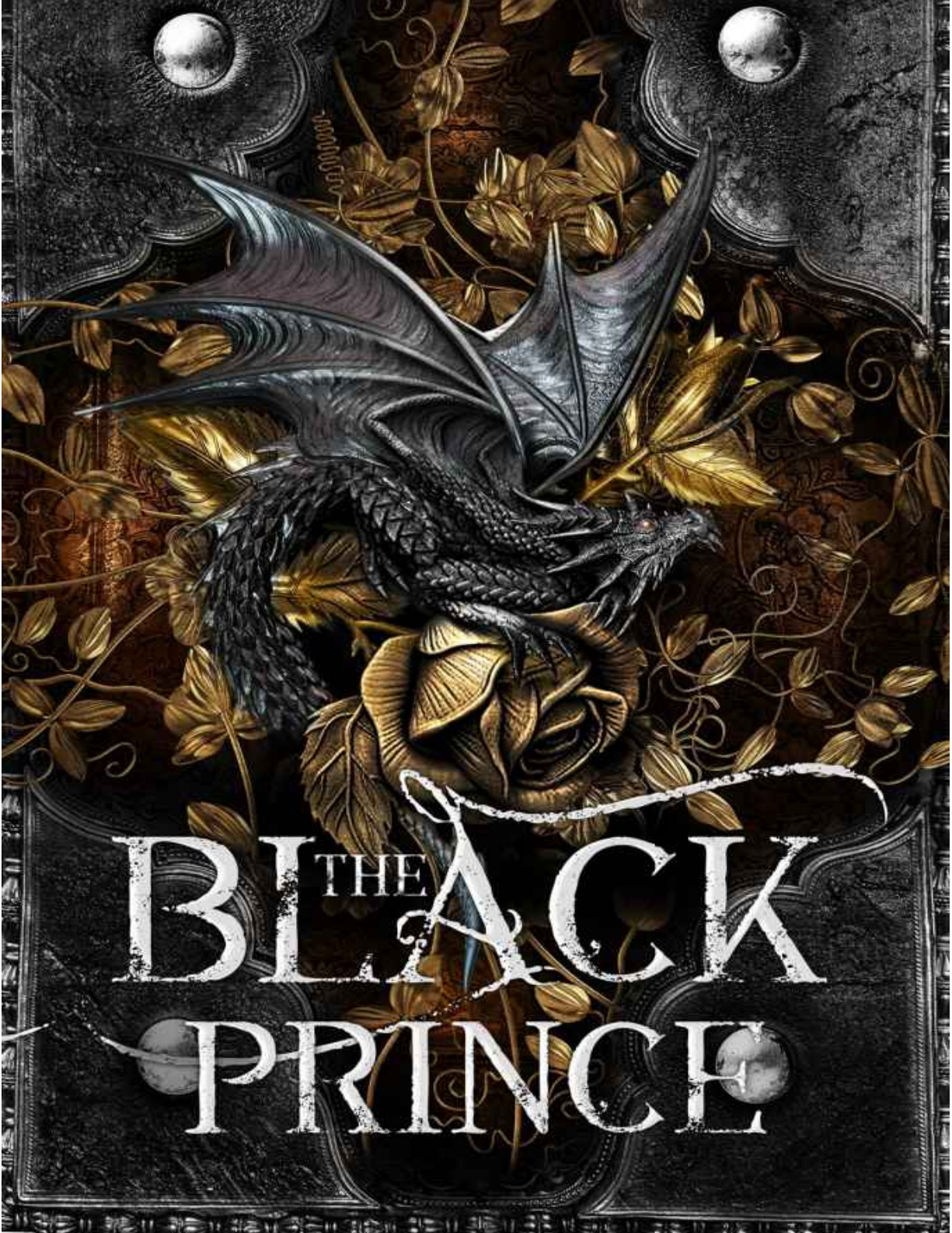
"Always." He slipped his hand into Eroan's. "You were forged to save the world."

Eroan squeezed back. "Until it is done."

"Together."

The End

ARIANA NASH



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SUMMARY

In the war-torn rubble of the human world, can a rebel elf and a lost dragon prince find love, or will a dark threat tear them and their world apart forever?

A new land, a new court, a new king, but some things never change.

Broken in all ways, Akiem fled his life as the amethyst prince only to land at the mercy of the beautiful but deadly diamond king, Luceran.

Akiem knows dragons. He knows he'll die today, tomorrow, whenever Luceran's executioner brings down his axe, and maybe it's all he deserves. He's ready for death, craves it even, like he craves the elf with flame-red hair and a sly smile, the damn elf whose stolen kiss lit Akiem up in ways he didn't know were possible.

Akiem doesn't do males and he definitely doesn't do elves. But some things do change.

Drifter, mercenary, lover — Zane is all those things. He'll do almost anything for coin. But he doesn't do dragons and he definitely doesn't do love.

It's not such a bad life for an elf. Better than the rest of his kin, living under the rule and whims of the dragon king, Luceran.

Working as a bodyguard in Bayston should have been quick coin in his pocket before moving on. But King Luceran has a new toy he parades at court. A dragon with eyes of gold and scales as black as night.

He probably shouldn't have kissed him. Definitely *should* have killed him.

And now, moving on is the farthest thought from Zane's mind. Because Luceran's new toy is not like the other dragonkin. And maybe, just maybe, the terrible, beautiful beast has the key to freeing all the persecuted elves and unlocking Zane's restless heart.

Zane doesn't do love and he doesn't do dragons.

But with the arrival of the Black Prince, everything is about to change.



Please note: The Black Prince contains references to self-harm and the psychological impact of rape.

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The Black Prince

Ariana Nash

Dark Fantasy Author

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CHAPTER 1



Akiem

THEY DID things differently in this land, Akiem considered as the dragonkin, Lord Clarion, swung his axe down with devastating accuracy. The blade severed the elf's head from her neck and slammed three inches deep into the woodblock beneath her.

Over the years, Akiem had learned not to flinch. To flinch was to broadcast emotion. Emotions were a weakness. Weakness killed dragons.

The elf's head rolled a few feet and came to rest on her right cheek, her eyes already clouded.

Death didn't take long. Once in its grip, one rarely escaped.

Akiem had felt death's touch before. The first time when Mother had discovered a secret of his. The second more recently. At least this elf's sentence had been final. His torture persisted.

"Justice is served," the elven elder, Killian, declared. He was a tall, thin example of his race. From his narrow boots to his tapered ears, he lacked the physical presence of elves that Akiem was more accustomed to, like a swift breeze or harsh word might topple him, but he spoke with an authority his weak body belied. This elf was used to being heard. His voice carried far, filling the large receiving room, one of several vast spaces the dragon king used for gruesome spectacles.

The two elves behind their elder with their longbows and daggers certainly had greater presence than the elder, but the three of them together would be no match against any of dragonkin gathered here, including Akiem.

He couldn't recall what crime the elf female had committed. It took little convincing for King Luceran to end an elven life. She'd likely done something as simple as steal a horse, or perhaps she'd strayed into a part of the city prohibited to her kind.

He stared at her clouded blue eyes.

An elven death had never bothered Akiem before.

It didn't bother him now, he reassured himself, picking a piece of white fluff from his dark sleeve. Such things were necessary. He came from a land across the ocean, on the other side of the world, where elves roamed freely, ultimately causing chaos. No such chaos reigned here. As far as he could tell, from his short time in Luceran's territory, everything ran perfectly smoothly, all thanks to the king.

"Justice indeed." King Luceran rose from the only chair in the hall. Shaped from scrap metal roughly hammered together with planks of wood, the chair was an ugly creation, making the king seem all the more glorious in his lace-embroidered gray leathers. He stepped down a level to join the elves and the gathered dragonkin.

Luceran appeared young in human form—younger than Akiem's late twenties, if a dragon's age could be measured in human years. Slimmer and leaner, but also quicker for it, Luceran wasn't physically imposing. Akiem had known physically stronger dragons, like the metals, made of muscle and rage. If physicality were all that mattered among dragons, he would be at the bottom of the food chain. But Luceran's physical weakness disguised the whip-like mind behind it.

Luceran was diamond to his core, and just as sharp and unyielding.

The three elves who had come to witness justice regarded the king coolly, as only elves could. Stubborn, all of them. The more Akiem came to know elves, the more their stubbornness appeared to be a racial trait. They'd stare death in the face, baring tiny fangs as if they truly believed they stood a chance against powers far greater than they. Fools. Barely more worthy of admiration than the cattle Akiem ate.

Luceran was bigger than the elder's two guards and broader in the shoulders. Most all dragons were larger than elves, but Luceran had finer

features too, such as his sculpted jawline and long, pale lashes, which would have earned him a quick death in Akiem's amethyst brood. A tail of long white hair licked down his back. Akiem might even call the king *pretty*—no, that wasn't right. No dragon was pretty. Such a word wasn't fit for dragons. The king's design was *striking*.

"Need I remind you of the little effort it would take for me and mine to topple your houses?" Of course, Luceran's words did remind them. His voice filled the room, filled the ears of all here too. This region's vocal accents had taken some time to adjust to. Akiem's accent had been termed as *English*, and those here called themselves *American*. Such words meant little to Akiem. The language was the same as his, just the sound of it was twisted.

The skinny elder elf bowed his head, and the guards behind him did the same. "We are forever your faithful servants."

Akiem's attention wandered to the right-most guard. Clad in leather and strips of white cotton, he seemed the resourceful type. The other guard, the one with blue-black skin, wore more daggers. Something about the stillness of the first made Akiem look deeper. The elf's russet-red hair appeared blood red under the light leaking in through the windows. He wore a small metal hoop earring at the top of his ear, drawing attention to how it tapered.

All three elves still bowed their heads, waiting to be dismissed, but as Luceran turned away, the red-haired guard looked up, straight into Akiem's gaze. The sudden eye contact stripped Akiem raw. By the Great Ones, it was as if this elf held no fear. Akiem opened his mouth to alert the king, but the elf's eyes glittered the most startling shade of green he'd seen outside of dragonkin, and the alarm he'd intended to raise fell away, inexplicably unvoiced.

The elf's bow-shaped lips ticked into the corner of his mouth, as though he knew his gaze had stalled Akiem's thoughts, and then this brazen elf did the most foolish thing: he winked.

Akiem flinched.

The king hadn't seen, and all the dragonkin watched the king. None among the crowd had witnessed the elf's ridiculous behavior. Did this one wish to die? Because Akiem could see it done. A single word to draw Luceran's attention back, would be enough. Lord Clarion, the king's broodbrother, had a well-known bloodlust for elves and would delight in wetting his axe with more elven blood.

“You are dismissed,” the king said. “Leave the grounds before my hungry kin pick you off.”

Akiem glanced at the red-haired elf, but any hint of a smile now hid behind a stoic mask. Had he imagined the eye contact, the wink? Surely not. Yet, of late, his mind had been showing him things, dreaming things that tried to twist his thoughts in knots.

“Akiem.” Luceran clicked his fingers, and Akiem glided into motion to stand beside the king.

“Yes, my liege?”

“What are your thoughts regarding the elf’s death?” Luceran asked.

It was a perilous place, to be seen beside Luceran. Akiem had learned that early on. This court was full of teeth, and like any trap, it was armed and ready to spring shut. Dragons looked at him—the newcomer—with envy. Behind his back, they schemed and snickered. Akiem knew their games and how to play them. He’d been playing them all his life. They were all dangerous, but the most dangerous of them all was beside Akiem, and as long as the king remained such, Akiem would stay by his side.

Akiem regarded the cooling pool of elven blood and the axe lodged in the block. “A quick death. Few could ask for such a merciful end.”

Luceran considered the words, then a smile touched his lips. “Indeed.”

Lord Clarion—as white-haired as his brother but physically stronger—slung the elf’s headless carcass across his shoulders, caring little for the stream of blood that soaked the back of his shirt. He snatched the severed head by the hair and carried it alongside him, letting it bump against his leg. The head would prove something of a whimsy for dragon kits to tear into.

The hall’s closing doors drew Akiem’s eye. He glimpsed the darker-skinned elf, but the cocky red-haired fool had gone on ahead. With an attitude like his, a dragon would soon deal with him. Perhaps his head would be thrown to the kits next. At least his end would be final.

CHAPTER 2



Zane

“WHO DO you think the king’s new pet was?” Jevan bit into the roasted chicken leg and tore off a chunk of meat. He soon followed that with a tankard of whatever swill this inn served and gulped half its contents without stopping for breath. A quick wipe with his sleeve and the whole display started again.

Zane stared at his friend, openly disgusted by the male’s ability to eat like a fat horse, yet secretly impressed. His own stomach turned over at the thought of food so soon after what they’d witnessed at court. He hadn’t known the victim of the king’s wrath, but he’d heard she’d been foolish enough to steal food. There was nothing wrong with that—everyone had to eat—her mistake had been in getting caught.

“What new pet?” Zane asked, feigning ignorance. He kicked his boots up on the table and leaned back in the chair, fingers laced together behind his head as he claimed the entire tabletop as his. The lower angle also offered the best view of the server’s ass. A little young for his taste, maybe eighteen, but if the earlier smile and brush of the shoulder were any indications, he’d be game for a frolic. Zane wasn’t much older, but he preferred males who knew their way around themselves and others. Besides, the young were too quick to fall in love. Still, he hadn’t tapped *that* ass yet, and it really was the kind he couldn’t resist.

Jevan dropped the gnawed-on bone into its bowl and wiped his hands on a cloth. “The dragon you spent the whole time eye-fucking.”

Zane mock-scowled. Of course Jev had noticed his wandering glances. “I have no idea what you’re referring to. An elf of my esteemed character would not be interested in an uptight, egocentric dragon.”

Jev barked a laugh. “You’re so full of shit. I saw his face while you were eyeballing him. He about shifted on the spot. You’re lucky he didn’t squeal to the king.”

“Just some extra piece of ass that washed ashore. The king’s obviously fucking him,” Zane said, answering the earlier question.

“Must everything be about sex with you?”

Zane grinned. “Said like a male who isn’t getting any.”

Jev showed him his middle finger in a gesture they’d picked up along the north-east coast.

Although, to be fair to Jevan, Zane had been eye-fucking the dragon dressed in black. The beast had looked wrapped up so tightly in all those buckles and belts that he could pop at any moment, and Zane wanted to be there when that happened. Strictly speaking, elves and dragons didn’t mix, unless a dragon happened upon the docks near the full moon to see if they might find an elf to satisfy their *other* hungers. He’d heard rumors. Didn’t plan on ever going there, though. Zane didn’t need to solicit such attention when, more often than not, it was thrown at his feet.

Still, Luceran’s shadow was interesting—so dark beside the king’s diamond-whiteness. He had an emptiness about him, as though someone had hollowed him out and left him standing. If given the opportunity, Zane would gladly spend the night filling him right back up again.

He shifted in the chair. He rarely had such thoughts about dragons. The fascination with the dark one bothered him more than he let on to Jevan. Dragons were abusive assholes at the best of times, and at their worst they were fucking monsters. Better to forget the dark one and move on to someone more likely to reciprocate his advances.

The server was looking over. With his hair cropped short and his ears pricked high, adorned with small hoop earrings and studs, he clearly liked to advertise his prettiness. Zane flicked a hand up and jerked his chin, summoning him. The male added a sway to his narrow hips that wasn’t there when dealing with other customers. Good, because Zane really needed the company.

“What can I serve you, sir?” He wore a bracelet made of plaited leather and beads. What other trinkets did he have about his person that Zane might discover?

Zane gave him a smile that had melted hearts up and down the east coast. “Besides some time alone with you when your shift is over, I’d like some wine. Make it strong.”

The server cocked an unimpressed eyebrow and flounced to the bar.

Zane pursed his lips, unaccustomed to anyone refusing him. “Did I misread him?”

Jev twisted in his chair to get a long look at the server. He faced Zane again, mouth chewing up a laugh. “Maybe he’s heard of the red-haired devil fucking his way through every town on the east coast.”

“You think?” They’d been in these parts for weeks now, working as hired muscle for what little coin there was rattling around. Zane *had* sampled some of the goods in the local bars. Where else was an elf supposed to get some ass?

Jev snorted and rolled his eyes. “By Alumn’s light, you’re so freakin’ gullible when it comes to your number one love.”

Zane frowned. “My what now?” Love? Shit, there was no need to bring love into this.

Jev laughed harder. “*You*, numbnuts. If you weren’t my friend, I’d punch some of that pretty right off your face.”

Humor plucked at Zane’s mood, brightening it. Gesturing at his face, he replied, “This pretty is untouchable.” He puckered his lips for Jev, instantly silencing his friend’s laugh.

“Don’t.” Jevan pointed a thick finger. “Take all that and your ego”—he waved his hand at Zane—“to one of your fuck boys.”

The server chose that moment to dump a tankard in front of Zane and scoop up the coin waiting on the tabletop. He left with a huff, making it clear he’d heard every word.

Zane watched the missed opportunity stalk away, all the lean and muscled inches of him. With a sigh, he picked up the drink and found Jev scowling at him from across the table. “What?”

“I’m wondering what I did to piss off Alumn for me to get stuck with you as a friend.”

“Oh, come now, what have I done that’s so bad?”

“At the execution, didn’t you care?”

His mood abruptly soured. He'd come here to *forget* about the execution. "She knew the fucking rules." He took a drink, needing it more now. The hot, spicy liquid went all the way down and tried to burn a hole through his soul. Damn, that was good stuff. "Don't fuck with dragons and we all get to live."

"You're all heart, huh?" Jev grumbled.

What was Jev's problem? Zane planted his boots on the floor, leaned in, and looked his friend in the eye. He could remind him how they'd crawled out of the westland mud while dragons screeched above, but the shadow in Jevan's eyes suggested he knew. Here, on the east coast, King Luceran did things differently, and that was a *good* thing. Sometimes, an elf paid with her head so the rest of their race could roam mostly free. Her death had hit Jev harder than Zane. His dark skin had turned wheaty. "Go get some light or get laid."

"Yeah, maybe I will." Jev stood, grabbed his tankard, and stumbled to the bar. He'd probably stay there for the rest of the night, and maybe tomorrow he'd soak up some of Alumn's generous warmth. Sunlight could fix just about any grim mood.

Zane huffed through his nose. The combined chatter from the elves rose and fell in waves, washing away his rattling nerves. Being around his people and hearing normal talk helped, but what he really needed was a few more of these tankards and someone willing to get personal with him for a few hours. The guilt for his own survival would return tomorrow. Until then, he'd do his damndest to drink and fuck the memories into submission.



ZANE REACHED for the wall of a nearby building to prop himself up. If the street and houses would just stop spinning for a few seconds, he could get his bearings. Rubbing at his face helped scrub off some of the drunkenness. The cool evening air cleared the rest.

Spectacularly wasted and deliciously numbed, all he needed was someone to warm his bed. He smiled at the fat moon hanging low over the city's jagged skyline and felt laughter bubbling.

Huh, the moon was full, and here he was, a stroll from the old docks. Well, that seemed fateful, didn't it? As he happened to be in the area, he'd take a quick look to see if the rumors were true. The goddess Alumn had guided his boots here, and no elf would risk incurring her wrath by ignoring her.

He crossed an old road flanked with half-battered high-rises. Rumors claimed the buildings had been glass and steel once, and they'd lined the streets like enormous palisades. Elves had since remade them into towers, patched them up with wooden scaffolding, and turned each level into homes, creating a new shantytown.

He fell into step with other elves headed toward the waterside. These folks were wandering toward the docks for a reason, but they couldn't all be after the company of dragons, could they?

Following the winding streets, he eventually came to rows of market stalls overflowing old sidewalks. Hanging lanterns lit the stall corners, lighting up the market. As the street narrowed and the stalls increased in number, the bustle enveloped him, sweeping him along. This was the intrigue? A night market held on the full moon?

He browsed the wares and spied a few thieves working coin from the pockets of those in the crowd. In the past, he'd done the same, but unlike the unfortunate elf who had lost her head, Zane had never gotten caught.

He'd met Jevan on a street like this. His friend had been wearing scruffy clothing, with his hat in hand, begging for coin. Zane had stolen his hat and coin, and the asshole had tracked him down. They'd scrapped in the gutter as if their lives depended on it. Jev had won, but instead of beating the shit out of Zane, he'd offered his hand. Right after, Zane had proposed they work together. Eight years of surviving side by side, taking coin, working the grind, and traveling from town to city to town. It wasn't a bad life. At least it *was* a life, which was more than any of the extinct humans could say.

He plucked his coin pouch from his belt and tucked it deeper into his pocket, just in case any little-fingered elfling took a shine to it.

The stalls sold old-world trinkets: hooks and boxes, bells and pots, twisted things that made no sense. A little windmill, perched atop a stall roof, powered a music box, which played human music, of all things. Interesting, but there was nothing on offer he needed. There was no use in carrying anything other than weapons and a spare pair of boots. He didn't

have roots, or a home, and didn't need strange human fancies weighing him down on the road. But some folks lived in homes, and they traded what little coin they had for the curiosities of the long-gone human world. He'd seen elven homes brimming with bits of the old world, their owners like magpies collecting shiny shit to line their nests. There were villages outside the city that practically overflowed with all this junk; they even had electricity to make their lights glow. Zane didn't see the point when Alumn's light was enough to feed the soul.

A citrusy tingle on his lips alerted him. Dragonkin. Scanning the crowd, he spotted her—a tall, imposing female—then saw others mingling among the elves. Really, they didn't mingle so much as carve their way from point A to point B, brushing aside anyone in their path. Some talked with elves, and some browsed the stalls. The deeper into the docks Zane wandered, the dirtier the lamps became, and the distance between elf and dragon decreased.

Zane knew sex. He reveled in it—life was too short not to partake in pleasure wherever available—but the one thing he'd never realistically entertained was sex with a dragon. Yet here it was, out in the open. The beginnings of it anyway. He saw their touches and how the dragon's body language crowded the elves. He saw their coy smiles and illicit touches. Dragons and elves getting more than personal was forbidden by Luceran, but there were plenty here who hadn't gotten the message, and the rest appeared to look the other way.

Coin changed hands. Everyone got what they wanted.

Then it occurred to his alcohol-addled mind that none of this was consensual. Dragons held the power. If an elf said no, that elf would lose his or her head, coin or not. No elf was strong enough to stop a dragon from doing whatever the fuck it wanted.

He recalled the sound of the axe coming down and how the elf's sobbing had suddenly ceased. Such a simple thing, but witnessing her end had been something else entirely.

He'd seen death.

What elf hadn't?

But he didn't seek it out. He was paid to guard higher-society elves, mostly, and to look the part, but he wasn't a killer—not by choice, and only on the frontline, when Jev had pulled him from the mud.

Memories jostled for purchase. Mud in his mouth. Its gritty taste mingled with blood. Jevan's hands around his waist, pulling him free, dragons screeching, elves dying.

His gut flipped in warning.

He hadn't eaten, and now the wine was coming back to haunt him too.

Someone thumped into his shoulder, almost whirling him around. His drunkenness tried to dump him on his ass in the middle of the street, but hands grabbed his arms, steadying him.

Kind eyes smiled, setting Zane right again. "Hey, sorry there! Didn't see you." The male elf patted him on the shoulder, then stomped on, head down.

"Sure, fine..." Zane wavered on the spot. He'd been going somewhere, hadn't he? He distinctly recalled coming downhill to the docks, so he needed to go uphill to get back to the lodge. He'd seen enough of the docks to know he didn't need to linger or return.

"Oy!" a young'un shouted behind him.

Zane turned. A tall figure cloaked in black lifted an elfling off his feet and held him dangling like a worm on a hook.

"Hey!" Zane barked before noticing the cloaked figure had the same square set and substantial presence of all dragons.

The dragon's shoulders tensed.

Nearby chatter fell away.

Shit. He couldn't win a one-on-one fight with a dragon. But, by Alumn, he wasn't standing by while a dragon beat on a little elf either.

"Hey you..." He stepped forward, found that his bravado held, and kept right on walking until he was almost chest to chest with the hooded beast.

The dragon dropped the elf. The little scout rebounded fast and darted off, leaving Zane facing a hooded figure that, in dragon form, would fill this street and crush every elf inside it.

A shaft of light cut across the male's whiskered chin, but the rest of his face remained well hidden beneath the hood, as though he'd deliberately cloaked himself from head to toe.

Zane's instincts pulled on him to apologize and back off, saving his neck from Lord Clarion's blade. The only problem was, his feet wouldn't budge and any apology had lodged in his throat. The dragon wasn't moving either. According to protocol, Zane should dip his head and turn away, but as the dragon hadn't called him out on it, his mischievous streak demanded

he see how far he could push his luck. Some witty remark would be perfect right about now, but Zane's thoughts had all stalled. He managed a cocky smile, tucked a thumb into his pocket, and pretended he wasn't facing down an apex predator.

"Your coins." The dragon produced a money pouch, just like the one Zane had.

What? Zane tapped his pocket. Empty. That damn little elf, the one he'd saved, had stolen from him.

"That little rat." Zane plucked the offered pouch from the dragon's fingers. "I er... Thanks."

"You're welcome."

He didn't speak like anyone Zane had ever heard. His accent was all angles and edges. Zane wanted to hear him speak some more. He tried to think of something to say, something to keep the dragon from leaving, but the seconds passed, and the silence grew sharp and uncomfortable. Damn, he was usually better than this.

The dragon dipped his head, moving only the hood and shadow, and stepped around Zane.

The exchange was over, yet Zane wasn't done. He sensed the dragon had wanted to say more, or perhaps that was Zane's imagination making more of the male's strange silence. But there was an opportunity here, wasn't there? A hint of *something*. The dragon had helped him. It seemed only fair that Zane return the favor.

Zane turned. Beneath the heavy cloak and hood, the male could be anyone. He could be vicious or cruel. Zane had no reason to think he was any different from all dragons. But why hide his face? The other dragons here announced their presence. They walked through the crowd like they owned every elf on the street. This one was quiet. Too quiet. If he hadn't stopped the thief, he likely would have continued to move among the crowd unseen. So why help at all?

"Were you looking for someone?" Zane asked before common sense could stop him.

The dragon pulled up short.

Zane could taste his damn heart beating in his throat. It wasn't wise to provoke them, yet he'd done just that. This was one of those moments Jev had repeatedly warned him about, the moments when Zane went too far, pushed a little too hard, asked one question too many, and kept right on

doing that *thing* until it got them locked up, or fired, or both, like that time in Oldport.

The dragon turned his head, all cloak and hood. Nothing of his face or expression showed. Was he angry, intrigued, insulted?

Alumn, this was a terrible idea. Damn the goddess for guiding him here. He'd be having words with her the next time he prayed. He'd heard a rumor that the elven goddess was part dragon, so maybe she was behind his actions tonight. Little else made any sense.

"You know..." He laughed and waved off his own foolishness. "Forget I asked."

He'd head back to the lodge, crash on the bed, and write this off as a drunken misadventure. But the way back was past the dragon, and despite the street being some forty feet across, the male somehow filled it. That left him with one way to go: deeper into the docks, where fewer lanterns flickered.

Fuck it. His pride dictated that was the only way out. How bad could a night get anyway?

Zane turned and walked deeper into the dark.

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CHAPTER 3



Akiem

WERE YOU LOOKING FOR SOMEONE?

Akiem hadn't come here for *that*, though he knew other dragonkin did. He'd just needed to get out of Luceran's compound, to hide under a hood and walk and walk. Taking to the wing was too painful. Old and new scars pulled every muscle taut. These days, flight was always the last option. After he'd walked the streets for an hour, nothing hurt save for his feet, and nobody cared to look twice at him. Even the elves paid him no mind. He was nothing here. Invisible.

Nobody cared to even *see* him, unlike at Luceran's court, where eyes crawled over him every moment of every day.

He could have walked all night if not for the red-haired elf with his constantly moving smile, like it had a mind of its own, and glitteringly mischievous eyes.

The same elf from the execution. The same elf who had *winked* at him.

Akiem had seen him ambling through the crowd. The thief's partner had bumped into him while a young elf had used the distraction to free the coin pouch from his pocket. They'd played the red-haired elf for a fool, and something about that had triggered Akiem to interfere.

He'd come to the docks for the air, for the people, for the pleasure of being a shadow, not to get involved.

Were you looking for someone?

The question had been simple, really, yet Akiem had lost his voice. He hadn't thought he'd been looking for anything in particular, but upon hearing the elf's question, he'd stumbled.

He knew what happened in these parts: propositions and coins changing hands. Courtly dragons spoke of it in whispers. More than goods were traded at the docks. More, like pleasure.

Dragons came to dally with curious elves. It was all beneath Akiem. Elves were animals, cattle, food. Yet standing there, with the elf's words ringing in his ears, he'd understood the appeal of having company. Part of him ached so badly to no longer be alone, but a larger part recoiled deeper inside himself at the thought of intimacy of any kind.

Then the elf had said to forget it, leaving Akiem with an alarming sense of loss. He had turned to stop him, to ask what he'd meant, but the elf had already vanished into the dark. Did he know where he was going? What if another dragon found him? Someone likely to hurt a lost elf? He'd appeared a little unsteady, nothing like his rigid, poised self at court.

He should leave him to his fate.

An elf such as him didn't need him interfering.

Akiem tapped his fingers against his thigh. This elf attracted trouble. He was also intoxicated, and few dragons could resist such easy prey. If he continued on his current path, he'd be hunted down by any number of the dragonkin here.

Akiem sighed and followed the distant figure deeper into the waterside section of Bayston city, where empty structures hugged the water's edge and old metal cranes hung like enormous gallows across the sky.

Trouble soon appeared in the form of a pair of dragonkin in human form. They peeled away from shadowed doorways and closed in behind the elf. Only moonlight licked the old streets here. Either the elf was a fool, or he was deliberately leading the dragons along. Akiem had known elves who would trap curious dragons this way, but those on this side of the ocean didn't appear to possess the same murderous or suicidal streak. Maybe this example of elvenkind was about to prove Akiem's assumptions wrong?

One dragon lunged at the elf. The elf produced a small dagger and got a slash in, but such a small weapon was no deterrent for a dragon. The big male grabbed for the elf, causing him to tip over a curb. He fell onto his side.

Akiem's pace quickened.

The dragons towered over the fallen elf. Bad times flickered across Akiem's vision. How many memories featured Akiem falling the same way? With someone bigger, stronger, heavier crowding close? He'd experienced the great weight of an unwanted dragon pressed over him, inside him, tearing him apart. Akiem had deserved it, but he would not witness such a thing again, not even on an elf.

He tore off the cloak and whistled through his teeth. The shrill sound darted like an arrow across the empty street. The dragons jerked their heads up.

One had his hand on his crotch, indicating where he intended the assault to end.

Rage warped Akiem's better judgment. Distantly, it occurred to him that Luceran might not appreciate him brawling in the streets, but the need to see this end before it properly began crushed that thought.

Heated power rushed in, filling him up and pooling fury into the emptiness. He couldn't have stopped the shift if he'd wanted to. He breathed in, collecting the rush of raw power through his entire being, then breathed out, freeing the truth. Matte black scales exploded outward—too many missing, scarred, or broken. His soul stretched far, swallowing all the pain and hurt, until it became part of who he was and what he'd become.

Dragon.

Armored scales as black as night.

Teeth sharp and bright.

He stoked the amethyst fire low in his throat, lifted his head, and bared his teeth, giving the dragonkin a moment to understand he was not posturing.

He clamped his jaws around the first dragon before he could retaliate. Magic tingled on his tongue, a warning that his prey was about to shift. Keeping his teeth caged around the dragon's body, he freed his amethyst fire. Dragons were resistant to his fire, but not in human form. The one he'd bitten screamed for all of two seconds before the superheated purple fire consumed him.

Akiem tossed his roasted carcass aside and focused on the second dragon. This one had been about to rape the elf.

Akiem lowered his head, pinning the foul male under his gaze.

He hadn't shifted and seemed reluctant to. Whatever he was in dragon form, it was weak enough for him to drop to his knees and blubber like a runt. "Don't tell Luceran! By the Great Ones, please!"

At the mention of the king's name, Akiem's fire simmered hotter, burning his throat, seeking freedom. He'd killed worthless dragons like this one the moment they'd hatched from their eggs, giving them the mercy of a quick death. Dragons were different here. Luceran tolerated sniveling weakness. Akiem did not.

"Please," the runt snuffled. "He'll—"

Akiem might have had mercy in him once. Not anymore. He snapped his teeth through the dragonkin's middle, cutting him clean in half, and tossed his torso aside too.

The fallen elf watched on. Akiem expected him to reek of fear. If the elf ran, Akiem would struggle not to give chase, considering how hot his blood pumped. Impossibly, however, the elf didn't smell of fear. He didn't tremble. He looked up, the tiny dagger clutched in his hand as though it might protect him from a dragon the size of a dockside building.

Were you looking for someone? The fool had asked a monster to his bed.

Akiem huffed, blasting the elf with air and dust. He spluttered and coughed, then rubbed at his eyes to clear them, but still he looked on, unfazed.

Impossible creature.

Akiem was done here. He opened his wings but found the dockside too narrow to expand them fully for flight. Pain danced down his back. Old scars lit up like fireworks beneath his scales. The one on the back of his neck, too close to his crown, burned the most. It was old, older than Luceran's new scars. He grunted off the pain and climbed the outside of a derelict building, needing the elevation to take to the sky properly.

At the top, he turned in a circle, taking in the glittering elven town, which had been reclaimed from a much older human one. Oil lamps throbbed warmly. It seemed almost peaceful from above, more peaceful than any life Akiem had known. He resisted the urge to open his jaws and scream at the elves to frighten them into their homes. The old Akiem would have, but he was a shadow here. Shadows did not scream into the night.

He spread his wings, gave them a few experimental flaps to measure the airflow, then dove off the side, skimming the dockside where the elf lay before soundlessly gliding out across the water.

The elf watched him the whole way.



“YOU WERE at the docks last night?”

He should have known Luceran would find out, but he hadn’t expected the news to travel so fast.

“Yes.” There was no point in denying it, and besides, Luceran hadn’t ordered him to stay on the grounds.

The king walked the grounds of the old compound, like he did every morning, rain or shine. An hour earlier, to Akiem’s shame, the king had found him tucked in a corner of his chamber, shivering and muttering like a crazed lower. Luceran had brought him around with a simple touch on the shoulder. Akiem distinctly recalled growling at him—*as a man*. It had taken him too long to come around from being dragon. He’d liked it there, buried beneath scale and fire. The physical pain still plagued him as dragon, but the mental torture didn’t persist. Only as a man was he haunted by the past. Maybe he was losing his mind to the darkness inside him. Maybe he *should* stop fighting and let his mind go.

“You don’t have elves among you, in your land across the sea?” Luceran asked.

“Not free like they are here.”

“It must have seemed strange to walk among them at the docks?”

It had been strange at first, but as he’d drifted unseen through their crowds, he’d found a strange comfort among them. Elves were *safe*.

“I found it”—*liberating*—“interesting.”

Elves, humans, dragons—they’d been at war in Akiem’s land, a place known to these people as Europe. Humans had been almost wiped out, but elves persisted. Akiem had spent a lifetime hunting and killing them. Seeing elves living alongside dragons was taking some getting used to.

“You killed two dragonkin while at the docks,” Luceran went on, tone level.

The king had spies everywhere. He had to, to keep the elves and dragons under control. Akiem knew that, but he’d hoped his excursion and its outcome would go unnoticed. It would have, if not for the foolish elf and his invitation. Akiem should have left him there.

“The dragons and I had a disagreement.” Akiem paced alongside the king, reading him out of the corner of his eye.

Luceran often invited him on these walks, speaking little, as though the king sensed how silence alone could be a gift. As far as Akiem knew, no other dragon had ever been given this courtesy. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, but Luceran had his desires, like any dragon.

Luceran arched a pale eyebrow. “Must have been some disagreement.”

The king hadn’t asked for an explanation, so Akiem didn’t offer one. Akiem seldom lied, or never used to, but he would about this. Luceran had seen him weak, seen him broken and near death. If the king knew why Akiem had killed the dragons—to protect an elf, of all creatures—he’d have a weapon to use against him.

“Any disagreements must be dealt with properly, lest the rule of my law break down. You’re new to us. Mistakes are to be expected. Do I need to discipline you?” He said this as though he were asking if Akiem enjoyed the sunshine on this fine morning. The tone was light, but it held a razor’s edge.

Old wounds throbbed. “If I overstepped, I apologize.”

They walked some more, passing through an old human tunnel with arches and doorways before exiting onto a barren street. All part of Luceran’s sprawling territory.

Luceran walked with his hands clasped behind his back and his face tilted toward the morning light. His snow-white hair fell down his back, unbound and silken. A breeze teased the locks. He looked like a fantasy Akiem’s half-broken mind had conjured, like he’d turn to mist if Akiem dared to touch him. Warm, pink, bitable lips held a contented smile. In the sunlight, he was ... *stunning*.

Akiem forced his gaze away. Such thoughts were not for him. In another time, another place, these desires, if discovered, would have seen him severely punished or killed. As the incident at the docks had proved, he was still finding his way among the laws here, and while he hadn’t seen anything to suggest that males desiring males was considered wrong, he also hadn’t seen any evidence to prove it was acceptable. Besides, it *wasn’t* acceptable. It was a rot at Akiem’s center, like so many others he harbored. A rot he denied.

“When I found you broken on the beach, I considered killing you,” the king continued whimsically.

You almost did, Akiem thought. He'd accepted death that morning on the beach. The diamond dragon had come upon him, and he'd recognized the look in his violet eyes: death. Luceran had sought it for Akiem, and Akiem might have begged him to deliver it had he had a voice left to beg. The journey had stripped him raw.

"You survived," Luceran went on. "I've welcomed you, housed you, brought you under my wing in a position of trust that few others enjoy..."

He trailed off, and when his pace slowed, Akiem slowed beside him until they both came to a stop. The sun baked this section of cracked road. Butterflies flitted over waving grasses as tall as men.

"Yet it's been weeks." Luceran held Akiem's gaze. His eyes, so pale, held an open honesty so rare in dragons. "And I don't know you any more now than I did then."

This was a dangerous conversation. Akiem did not know why Luceran had spared him on the beach, but he suspected it was the mystery about his origins and what lay across the sea that kept the king so enthralled. Gossip at court told of how the king had had other... *fancies*, mostly males. They'd been found dead once Luceran had tired of them.

Facing the king, he squinted into the sunlight framing him. "There is nothing to know."

"In all the years I've patrolled this coast, nothing has washed up alive on my beaches. Nothing. Yet on a morning just like this one, there you were, scales stripped raw from your journey, too exhausted to lift your head, and half mauled by something far bigger than you."

An ache spread across Akiem's forehead and down around the back of his neck. He rubbed it, trying to ease the memories. He did not want to remember the time *before*. Remembering was what caused him to curl into corners at night. It was easier to believe he'd died crossing the ocean and been reborn in this new land with Luceran as his king.

"What terrible thing were you fleeing from?" the king asked, blinking astute eyes.

"Everything," he replied, revealing too much and nothing at all.

Luceran studied his face, reading between every thin line. He'd seen Akiem's scars, as man and dragon, and read those like a map charting every bite and gouge. What Akiem could not say his body said for him. Luceran understood that.

Gods, Luceran was beautiful.

He almost reminded Akiem of himself. His old self. Proud. Strong. Untouchable. But he wasn't alone like Akiem had been. Luceran had a brood, a court, a vast network of dragons who knelt at his word, and a township of elves who did the same. Had Akiem been king in his own land for longer than a few weeks, he would have created something like Luceran's vision. Akiem admired him and his creation.

He noticed how the light played in Luceran's pale hair and lashes and kissed his cheek, adding a touch of pink to match his lips. His mind wandered along the fine edge of the male's jaw, and he yearned to run his fingertips there.

Luceran lifted his hand. Akiem flinched, expecting the worst and revealing his fear of it, but the king's fingers settled warmly on his cheek.

"Whatever happened to you," he said, "whoever hurt you, it's over. The ocean delivered you to me, and now you are mine." The words were kind, even soft, but the king's eyes darkened. "But you must follow my law. Do not think to play games with me, Akiem. It will not end well for you."

Fear snagged the breath in his throat. Play games? "I wasn't—"

Luceran's fingernails scratched furrows down Akiem's cheek. "You do not kill my dragons, and you do not walk the docks, fraternizing with elves —"

"That's not—"

The backhanded slap brought Akiem to his knees, facing the dirt. Blood pooled in his mouth. He spat into the grass and tongued the split on the inside of his cheek. He felt nothing. He was nothing. This was the way of things now. He was grateful for Luceran, for everything he'd done to return Akiem to some measure of sanity. *Loved* him, even, if that was the strange feeling darting inside him. He owed Luceran obedience.

"You're confined to your chambers for a week." The king's command fell hard.

Akiem swallowed blood. He rocked back on his heels and lifted his head, losing his gaze in the mocking blue sky. Throbbing heat burned his cheek and jaw, joining the rest of the hurt from invisible wounds. "Of course."

Luceran nodded and returned the way they'd come.

Akiem stayed alone in the empty street, among the ruins of an old world, breathing slowly while the sun tried to thaw the ice in his veins. He

didn't think he'd ever feel warm again. He lived with the cold, because it was all he deserved.

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CHAPTER 4



Zane

HE COULDN'T DECIDE if it was thunder or drums outside the door of his lodgings, and he didn't care either way, as long as both ceased so he could sleep off the mother of all hangovers.

"I swear on Alumn's tits, Zane, I will kick this door in and drag your ass through the street if I have to."

Not thunder. Jevan. And if he was mentioning Alumn's tits, he was pissed.

The hammering started up again, rattling the door on its hinges.

He wouldn't go away. Jev didn't quit.

Zane lifted his head from under the pillow and squinted into the gloom. Sunlight blasted through a slit in the drapes and sliced through his skull. It must have been an excellent night, because he had no memory of making it back to his bed. He grasped at memories from the past few hours and came up with the sight of the terrifying black dragon swooping over him. Fuck, he hadn't drunk enough to forget *that*.

Someone groaned beside him. A naked leg hooked over Zane's.

He blinked at the handsome male sleeping beside him and struggled to recall *anything*. After the goddess-awful incident at the docks, he'd returned to the bar. Ah, the bar. Right. The server lad. Shit. He'd told Zane his name

sometime between feverish kisses and thick-fingered groping. Now here they were.

Zane scrabbled around his mind for the name. Adam? Abraham? His waist curved inward slightly, and his sun-touched skin brought Zane's thought back around to running his fingers down his side, kisses following. He'd tasted like life-giving sunlight. The male had hidden tattoos in various nooks, like his ankles, behind his knee, between his thumb and fingers. Zane had kissed them all. And the lad, whatever his name was, had found Zane's tattoos, the delicate one running around his little finger and the smaller one at his hip. He'd traced each swirl and dip with his tongue.

A wrecking ball hit the wooden door, flinging it open so hard it hit the wall and rebounded. Jevan stormed inside, stomping straight for the bed. He grabbed the sheet and yanked, exposing Zane and his bed companion to the cold air.

"You." Jev pointed a finger at the server lad, who'd startled awake. "Get your shit and get out."

Zane watched the male peel himself from the bed, and at the delicious sight of his sunlit nakedness, he realized he remembered a good deal about last night after all, and much of it centered around that delightfully pert body. If there was any wasted skin on the male, Zane hadn't found it. Every part of him had a purpose, and Zane had made sure to explore each one.

"And you..." Jev turned his scolding glare on Zane. Zane stretched, naked from head to toe, reveling in the cool morning air. Jev's rage-tensed cheek twitched, but he wouldn't look away. He knew Zane's games too well. "Get the fuck dressed."

The server lad pulled on his pants, and with the rest of his clothes bundled in his arms, he made for the door, tossing a long, appreciative look over his shoulder, like someone already grieving the loss of a wonderful thing.

A balled-up sheet thwacked Zane in the head.

"We're due at the elder's house in fifteen minutes, and you're still drunk." Just like that, Jev ruined a perfectly good afterglow.

Zane swung his feet over the side of the bed and waited for the walls to stop wobbling. His clothes were scattered about the room in spectacular fashion. The server lad had been a firecracker once he'd gotten him back inside these walls.

“Focus,” Jev barked, propping himself against a chest of drawers and folding his arms. There was no arguing with him when he was like this.

“All right, all right.” Zane found his shirt, threw it on, and tracked down his pants, passing by Jev’s disapproving glare. “Didn’t dip your wick in anything last night then, eh?”

“Unlike you, I have standards.”

Zane snorted. “I have standards. They’re just real low.” He flashed his friend a grin.

Jev’s eye twitched. He was thawing.

Once dressed, Zane tightened the shirt laces, tugged on the snug-fitting overcoat, and raked his fingers through his hair, brushing out a few knots. A bath would have been ideal, but there was no time for that. “I thought the execution would be the end of it. What does that weed of an elder want with us now?”

“More guard duty. A note was shoved under my door early this morning.”

Early this morning? By Alumn, it was still early, wasn’t it? Zane crossed the room, parted the drapes, and peered into another late summer day. The sun had already made most of its arc across the sky, stretching the shadows long again. The city of Bayston—it’s old human name forgotten—had all manner of buildings clustered close. Some tall and skinny, some squat, some made of timber, some stone built. Elves moved along the old street routes, busying themselves with trading and fixing. Some lay sprawled like cats on rooftops, soaking up Alumn’s life-giving rays. The empty buildings outside Bayston’s center, with their glassless, vacant windows, looked inward like silent sentinels. They were ever-present reminders of what happened to those who fought dragons.

“We’re to accompany him to the west gate,” Jev explained.

“And stand behind him, looking like we care?” Zane turned away from the window, plucked his daggers, and slotted them home in their hip sheaths. “If he wasn’t such an emotionless plank, he wouldn’t have to buy friends.”

Jev’s lips twisted. Definitely thawing.

“You know I’m right.” Zane headed for the door.

“It’s easy coin,” his friend grumbled, clomping behind. “When was the last time we could say that?”

True enough. They'd fought a war not so long ago. He had no wish to fight another. There weren't enough coins in the world to buy away those memories.

"Zane..." Jevan's strange tone had Zane pulling up short by the door. His friend looked pained. "You all right?"

Zane shrugged. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"It wasn't you at the docks last night? You didn't see the black dragon kill two of its kin over an elf?"

Zane tossed him a throwaway smile, opened the door, and strode out onto the lodge house landing. "I was here all night."

"Talk is the elf almost got killed. If anything happened to—"

"Must be one lucky bastard to survive a dragon."

He wasn't sure why he'd lied or why it mattered, just that he'd seen a little of what went on at the docks and a lot more of a dragon up close than he ever wished to again. He'd seen dragons before, of course. At three years old, he'd watched a small one rip into his father. But he'd never seen one as close and none as devastating as *that* golden-eyed beast. The damn thing had flown silently off the dockside building. If Zane had blinked, it would have melted unseen into the darkness. Dragons weren't supposed to be that quiet. They were all bluster and noise.

He'd heard the king's "consort" was an obsidian jeweled with golden eyes, and those were rare, which likely meant the dragon who had saved him at the docks was the king's new pet, and that was not a thought he wanted to linger on. Luceran had a reputation for viciously guarding his shiny toys, and Zane had already poked that sleeping dragon more than once.

After the next job for the town elder, it would be time to move on. He preferred to keep his head on his neck, not at Luceran's feet.



THE EVENING ARRIVED EARLY in the shadows of the ruined buildings. Zane didn't know why humans had built them so high. Perhaps they'd wanted to reach the sky like dragons. The crippled towers acted like a ring around the elven sectors. Bayston's elves believed the ring protected them. Few

dragons were brave enough to fly through the standing monoliths, and so that's where the elves made their homes, under Luceran's watchful eye.

Elder Killian waved them over. Behind him, a line of rusted junk cut the street in half, dividing the habitable city from the barrens beyond.

"You will stand behind me," Killian said, not bothering with pleasantries. "Don't say or do anything unless I am threatened." The elder had his hair braided in a dozen painfully tight tails that pulled on his already narrow face. He'd clasped his hands together in front of him and locked them there.

"Are you likely to be?" Zane asked.

The elder held his gaze. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't need you, would I?"

Zane dipped his chin, opting for silence instead of the reply that would see him sacked and unpaid.

Jevan had taken up his position on Killian's right. He adjusted the longbow at his back and observed the barrier. Zane had left his bow back at the lodge. In the city streets, long-range weapons had little use, but Jevan wore his to complete the threatening picture. Jev arched an eyebrow behind Killian, echoing Zane's unease. The location was too isolated, too overlooked. It plucked on Zane's survival instincts.

Killian scanned the street beyond the barriers. The elder stood motionless, like a rabbit caught out in the open. He wasn't even dressed as he should be. Instead of the elder's simple attire, he'd wrapped himself in light leathers, presenting himself more like an elven scout than an official elder.

One more job and Zane was done with this city. He and Jev would head south for the winter and work the cold months with the sun-loving southern elves. They were always game for a laugh.

The wind whipped up dust and leaves as it tore through the street. A citrusy smell tingled his nose and throat. Dragons. Three emerged from farther down the street. All male.

Zane exhaled and shook out his hands, keeping his sheathed daggers within easy reach. The males were big, naturally. Dragonsight made their eyes slightly luminous in the building's shadow. They didn't wear weapons, believing they didn't need any. They had ample space between the towers to shift, although they'd have a hard time taking flight. That thought was too close to the memory of seeing the black dragon shift in front of him. That thing had been enormous. And now, facing three of the beasts, knowing

exactly what they were inside their human skins, he considered that should they want the elder and his guards dead, it would happen. Zane's little daggers and Jev's longbow wouldn't stop them.

Jev sent a worried glance toward Zane, brow pinched.

They'd be all right. It was just a meeting. They'd been through worse.

Shit, but this felt different. Maybe it was because of what he'd seen at the docks.

He balanced his stance, acutely aware of the many exits, should they need them.

The black dragon had fucked up his instincts, that was all. These dragons wanted no more trouble than Killian did.

"Killian," the lead dragon greeted with a smile full of teeth. His long white hair flowed about his shoulders, only restrained from the wind by a single band tied low. The wind rippled his loose clothes. Zane narrowed his eyes. This one had swung the axe at the execution: the king's brother.

"Lord Clarion." Killian bowed his head.

Zane's heart jolted. He skimmed the pair standing on either side of Clarion, recognizing them now that he had context. Why, by Alumn's light, were Clarion and his courtly dragons meeting with Killian? This wasn't official business, not on an unlit backstreet. This was something else, something both sides wanted kept quiet.

Clarion's gaze fell to Jevan before skipping to Zane. His thin lips lifted in a toothy dragon smile. Zane's blood chilled. Whatever the reason for this meeting, the dragons were eagerly anticipating something.

"Why the muscle?" Clarion asked. The male's deep voice made the words rumble. "Don't you trust me, Killian?"

Killian shifted on his feet, moving for what felt like the first time since the dragons' arrival. "These parts are unruly," he quickly said. Too quickly. He reeked of anxiety, and not only because of the dragons' presence.

Clarion's eyes flashed. "Oh, then it isn't us you guard against?" His companions' smiles inched wider. "Are we not worthy?"

He was fucking with Killian, like a cat with a mouse.

Zane grimaced. Killian was supposed to represent the elves, but right now, he just represented a wet-behind-the-ears fool.

"No. I-I..." Killian's hands fell open pleadingly. "It is merely... My reputation, of late, has been... somewhat lacking—"

“Trouble among the elves?” Clarion chuckled, talking over him. His dragons echoed his laughter, filling the street with their bass rumbling. He stepped closer to the elder, crowding him. The dragon was bigger in every way—taller, heavier, broader.

“The last batch was underfed.” The lord’s tone rumbled a warning.

“My apologies.” Killian dropped his gaze and turned his head to the side so he didn’t have to stare the male in the chest. “The harvest yield has been poor this year.”

Clarion’s mouth twisted, bored and impatient. He stepped back and waved a hand. “Bring out the fodder.”

Killian lifted his arm and clicked trembling fingers. The wind tore the sound away, washing it down the street behind them. Zane dutifully stared ahead, avoiding the smirks from the courtly guards. Next time, he and Jev would need more information. A note shoved under Jevan’s door wasn’t enough. If this went wrong, he wasn’t prepared.

The wind blessedly eased, and in the new calm, the sound of shuffling drew his attention behind him. He looked and would forever wish he hadn’t.

An elf led a line of elflings, each with a burlap bag over their head, from behind a building. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The elves were small and reedy. From their size, Zane guessed that their ages ranged from the likes of the little one who’d stolen Zane’s coin last night, to those on the cusp of maturity. They shuffled along in scuffed, worn shoes and tattered rags, hands roped to each other.

What was this?

Clarion brushed by, shoving Zane back a step. Killian said something, but Zane’s thumping heart drowned it out. He knew what this was, but there had to be another explanation. This could not be happening.

The elf who had brought the line of elflings out disappeared back down the street. Zane should have watched him go, but Clarion had reached them. The dragon lord pinched an elf on the arm. The small male whimpered, but he didn’t cry out.

Clarion screwed up his nose, unhappy. “They’ll do.”

The lord clicked his fingers, and his dragons moved in. One took the front of the line, lifting the rope to lead them on, while the other followed behind. Both had the blown pupils and glazed look of hungry dragons.

They were taking the elves.

That's what this meeting in the middle of nowhere was for: a trade. Elflings... for what? Was Killian selling them into slavery or worse? Clarion had called them *fodder*.

"What is this, Killian?" The wind dropped, making the question louder than he'd intended.

Killian stiffened and flung Zane a scathing glare. "You do not speak. Those were our terms," he hissed. "And you will address me as *Elder*."

The elder was more concerned with protocol than the lives of twelve elves he was supposed to *protect*. A restless sense of injustice burned Zane's patience away. "Where are they taking them?"

Killian's eyes widened, showing their whites. He was so blatantly afraid that he trembled. He reached for Zane, but Zane grabbed his wrist, twisted, and shoved him back. The elder stumbled over his feet. "You fucking coward. *Where are the dragons taking them!*"

Jevan lunged in, clutched Zane's arm, and pulled him back. "Leave it. Leave it, all right? This is not our fight." His friend shoved Zane in the chest, inserting himself between his friend and Killian.

Leave it?

Those dragons were taking the elves for fuck knew what, and Killian was letting it happen!

Zane yanked his fist free and shoved Jev off him. He was right—this wasn't their fight. Zane knew it. The sensible thing to do was back down, be the mute guard, get paid, and move on to the next town, where he'd drink and fuck the memories away, just like all the other horrors he'd seen. But how could he? How could Jev let those twelve be led to their deaths and say nothing?

"They're young'uns, Jev." Zane frowned. "You know what will happen to them. *You know!*"

Jevan's jaw worked, making his cheek twitch. Jevan was not heartless. He knew this was wrong. He'd seen the same shit Zane had and maybe lived worse. "It's. Not. Our. Fight," he repeated, holding Zane's glare.

"Shut him up," Killian snarled, "before they hear."

Too late. Clarion lifted his hand, halting the line. The lord turned on his heel and stared back at them.

Killian dropped to his knees and spread his arms out on the ground, like a willing servant. Zane watched the elder prostrate himself. Bile burned the back of his throat. Was that excuse for an elf what they'd all become?

Weak, bullied, compliant? By Alumn, this display was disgusting. Zane knew the law—elves submitted to dragons—but he had some pride left. Everything happening here was bullshit. Nobody would fight for those twelve elves because Clarion sanctioned the trade. Zane couldn't live with that.

"You have a problem, Red?" the lord demanded, jerking his chin.

"No." Jevan whirled and thrust out a steadying hand to stop Clarion. "No, my lord. He doesn't have a problem. We're leaving—"

"Yes, I fucking have a problem." The words were forever out, and with that knowledge came a stab of fear. But what was a little fear against the lives of twelve children? Zane jerked his chin, flicked open his dagger sheaths, and slid the weapons free.

"Zane!" Jevan snapped. "Stop!"

Clarion's nostrils flared. Instead of addressing Zane, he snarled at Jevan, "Is your companion simple?"

Jevan might agree, just to defuse the situation, and maybe it'd work. Maybe they'd go back to the lodge, shrug it off, and move on. That's what should happen. Zane knew it.

But Jev's posture changed. His shoulders tightened. He lowered his hands onto his weapons. They'd fought alongside each other, knee-deep in mud and blood and shit, and they'd lost, but Alumn be damned, there were fucking limits to how much the dragon bastards could be ignored, and taking elven children was a line that should never be crossed.

Clarion saw the change in Jev, and briefly, the male seemed confused, like two elves defying him was utterly unthinkable. He laughed, long and loud. His kin joined in, until the street rumbled with their laughter all over again, only this time the sound hid more of the dragons' growls.

Still chuckling, Clarion shook his head in disbelief. "Some advice." He gestured at Jev. "Take your friend and go. Leave it at that. What you saw here is just one trade among hundreds. You can't save them all. This is not a fight you can win, little elves."

Hundreds? Zane tasted fury on his tongue. It burned inside his chest and tried to split him open. "When word gets out about this, my kind won't stand for it."

Clarion's smile vanished. The dragon straightened. The change in him wasn't as subtle as in an elf. Violence shimmered in his eyes, in his snarl, and in the way he curled his hands into fists. He was made for rage.

He swung for Jev, but the elf had been watching for it and whirled aside. Then, lunging in, Jev slashed both daggers across the dragon lord's belly, opening up a thin bloody line.

It should have been enough.

But Clarion didn't slow. Didn't hesitate. He grabbed Jevan by the neck and reeled him in close, locking Jev's back against his chest. Jevan kicked and bucked, but the dragon had him.

Zane flung a dagger. The big bastard twisted, avoiding the blade.

He plucked his own dagger out of thin air—one of Jev's—and lodged it under Jevan's chin. The tip summoned blood and shortened Jev's breaths.

Shit, this hadn't been meant to happen.

Jev stopped fighting and shook his head as much as the dagger would allow: a warning to stop.

Don't, his eyes pleaded. Don't make this worse. Get away. Survive.

Zane had one dagger left. Just one dagger against three dragons.

There was no winning this. Clarion deserved to die, but Jev was right. They wouldn't be the ones to kill him.

Zane lowered his blade.

"Thank you." The lord grinned. The only evidence of the brief fight was a few loose strands of hair whipping across his cruel face and the red stain on his shirt. "This one is now mine. He is my guarantee that you'll keep your mouth shut about what happened here and what will continue to happen after every full moon, you little elf prick. If I see any sign of dissent in the elven districts, your friend loses his head."

Zane didn't feel the punch to his lower back until he was face down on the ground, trying to breathe around the pain. The other dragons had moved in. One snatched his dagger from his hands. A kick to the gut came next. It landed hard, stealing his air. He curled around the thumping agony, his lungs struggling to work. Another kick landed against his back, this one ripping a cry from his lips. He might have heard Jevan shout something, or perhaps he had cried out again. The pain became too much to think around. He let it happen, let them land their fists and boots, knowing it would end. And when it did, he'd hurt every single one of them for what they'd done.

CHAPTER 5



Zane

TWO DAYS PASSED before he could face crawling from his bed to wash off the crusted blood from his body. Another day before he could walk without needing to cling to the wall, and another before he left his room to check Jevan's lodgings.

The bed hadn't been slept in, and Jevan's small collection of personal items still lay on the dresser. The air smelled stale. He hadn't returned. Zane hadn't expected him to, but he'd hoped that maybe it had all been a horrible dream.

Clarion had Jevan, all because of him.

Zane picked up Jevan's silver locket from the dresser and popped it open. A curl of dark hair was nestled inside. Jev never wore it, but he always had it with him. The hair likely belonged to a lover or child—someone lost to him—but he'd never said who. He'd seen Jevan weep over it, seen him clutch it close when they'd both needed comfort.

He dropped it into his pocket, cleared out the rest of the items, informed the landlord of the vacant room, and headed to the bar.

Too many days had passed since the trade.

The elflings were lost. Without having seen their faces, Zane had no hope of saving them. But the dragonkin would take more children, and that made him want to take up a blade and kill any damn dragon that dare come

near him. Then there was the matter of Jev. He could handle himself, to a point, but no elf could stand against a dragon. Short-lived battles from the past proved that devastating fact.

Clarion had said he wouldn't kill him. Yet.

Zane ordered a drink at the bar and winced as he picked up the cup. By Alumn's grace, the dragons hadn't touched his face, save for a split lip. They'd known to keep the wounds below the neck. The swelling had subsided enough for Zane to at least function again.

He plucked Jevan's locket from his pocket and rested it on his palm.

Everything hurt.

What he'd seen at the west gate hurt the most.

Killian was handing the dragons elven young. For servitude, fucking, or eating, it didn't matter. The outcome was always the same. They'd suffer and die.

Jev had been right: it wasn't his fight. Zane should have kept his mouth shut, should have watched it all happen and come back here, to the bar, to drink the horror away, just like after the execution. Had he done that, Jev would be beside him now, bitching but free. He could imagine him telling him he was an ass. Instead, Zane was alone because he'd opened his mouth like a fucking fool, and Jev was paying for it.

He'd get Jev back. Somehow. He just had to get into Luceran's court and find Clarion. This time, he'd be prepared for the meeting.

"Hello, lover." The server lad set a tray of drinks down on the bar and unashamedly dragged his heated gaze over Zane. "I figured you'd have breezed out of town by now."

"I'm not going anywhere." He recalled his name now: Arlo. Funny how these things came back when one didn't try to remember. He'd been sure he'd forgotten it. With everything that had happened, he'd almost forgotten about Arlo too.

Arlo rested a hand on Zane's arm, right over where an angry bruise throbbed. He winced. Arlo saw and withdrew his hand, the lust in his eyes snuffing out. He'd read the wince as rejection. Collecting his tray, he managed a small smile. "Let me know if you need anything."

Zane nodded and let him think the worst as he left. He could have called him back, could have forgotten himself in him for a few hours, or at least distracted himself with a quick tumble, but it would have raised questions about Zane's many bruises. Arlo seemed like the type who got attached too

easily, and Zane had a rule not to fuck them more than once. Plus, he had other, more important things to consider.

He couldn't attack dragons head-on. That never ended well for elves. To get to Clarion, he needed to find another way. He could fight his way through, if he had the element of surprise, or use stealth. But getting into Luceran's compound wouldn't be easy, and if the dragons scented elf within their territory, it wouldn't end well.

There was another way.

One he'd already tested the waters of. It would require some... finesse.

Zane downed the drink and waited for the bruise to stop throbbing.

He'd find Clarion, and this time, he'd make sure the cuts went deep enough to ensure the dragon never traded in elves again.

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CHAPTER 6



*A*kiem

A WEEK CONFINED to his chambers—locked in isolation. The madness began on the third day. He knew the signs: tightness in his chest, rapid breathing, racing heart—all the symptoms of fear with no outward source, because the reason for the fear didn't exist, not on this side of the ocean. But his mind didn't care for facts, and his body followed along with the madness. He considered taking flight from the window, but Luceran's punishment would be worse than the mental torture he endured. So he paced and breathed and kept on living, because there was no other way. Every step was time passing, moments combining into a day and then a night. On and on and on.

The whole time, Luceran was in the adjacent room.

He heard the king, at times, moving about his chambers. Heard the doors open and close and voices in the hallway outside. *Company*. So close but out of reach. On the last day of his punishment, he picked up the pieces of his broken mind and slotted them back into place. They seemed to fit from the outside, but on the inside, they felt as fragile and sharp as ever.

He waited at the window looking out over the empty city. It looked like freedom, but Freedom was not a place. It wasn't something that could be given or taken. It was a state of mind. Or so he assumed. He'd never had freedom to know it. His mind was a prison he couldn't escape.

The connecting door between his and Luceran's chambers snicked, and the king breezed in, wearing layers of cream cotton, brown leather, and gold lace.

Akiem observed the male from the corner of his eye while continuing to stare out the window. If he moved from the window, he might do something foolish, like drop to his knees and beg the king never to shut him away again. Luceran couldn't know how Mother had repeatedly punished him this way. She'd tell her court she'd sent him on a faraway mission, and nobody would suspect he was deep inside the tower, locked in the dark for days on end, denied food, water, light, life. Denied *company*.

Luceran didn't know, but just as Akiem had heard the king moving about his chambers, the king must have heard Akiem's feverish mutterings. Akiem would never admit it to him, or anyone, but Mother's torture had made him stronger. The fact he was no longer strong wasn't her fault; it was his.

Luceran approached the window. "The Feast of the Rising is this evening. Do you celebrate such things where you're from?"

That was how his punishment ended, with no flare or ceremony. It was just another day to Luceran, while Akiem clung to the shredded pieces of his mind.

"No, we do not."

Feast of the Rising sounded like an homage to when the first great metals had broken from the ice and claimed the human world as their own. The jeweled had come later, when humans had flung their nuclear weapons into the fray, thinking the world-sundering explosions could kill dragons. It hadn't worked; the dragons had mutated instead, becoming the faster, more vicious jeweled dragonkin.

The king leaned a shoulder against the window frame opposite Akiem's. "Would you attend at my side?"

He asked as though Akiem had a choice.

Akiem turned his head, intending to tell him exactly that, but in the seven days spent lost in his head, he'd forgotten how deep Luceran's influence had hooked into him. The male reclined against the frame, his body tied up and buckled inside slate-gray trousers and a fitted boned waistcoat that tapered at the waist. Over one shoulder, he wore a half-length sheer cloak, transparent but for a slight flutter, like dragonfly wings.

A sudden, terrifying rush of heat flooded his veins, like his body had been triggered to attack. He saw himself crossing the few strides between them, shoving the king against the wall, and tasting his mouth, just to see if he tasted as sweet as he looked. The fantasy was pin clear. So clear, in fact, that its impact physically hurt. Disgust at his own filthy desires kicked him into motion. Akiem pushed away from the window and headed for the chamber door. His punishment was over, and he could leave. He had to leave before his body betrayed his arousal.

“Stop.”

He stopped, marooned in the middle of the room, halfway between the door and the king. Breathing through his nose, he waited. If the king came to him, he wasn’t sure what he’d do. He’d spent too long locked up alone. He couldn’t do *alone*, but he didn’t want to be seen either. Gods, he didn’t know how to be *Akiem* here, with Luceran, with these dragons in this court on the wrong side of the ocean. He wanted to be different, to change things, to change himself, but he didn’t know how.

Luceran’s hand landed gently on his shoulder. It felt like a lightning strike. The king slowly—so slowly—stood in front of Akiem. He was perfect. Eyes a deep violet. His hair done up with pins and curls, ready for the feast. His damn clothes all clipped and neatly edged. In winter, back in his homeland, he’d liked to roll in the snow as dragon, just to upset its soft perfection. Luceran was like that snow. Akiem wanted to destroy the picture standing in front of him, to rip it to shreds and fuck it until the male screamed his name, either in lust or fear.

The thoughts shocked him. Luceran said something. Akiem watched his lips form the words, saw the perfect teeth and the tip of the king’s quick tongue, but he didn’t hear his voice over the sound of his thunderous heart. *Wrong, wrong, wrong*, his heart said. He heard a chamber door slam inside his memory and felt the darkness bury him in isolation until Mother believed he’d suffered enough for his foul thoughts.

This was the king’s fault.

Luceran should never have locked him up. He was too dragon to be shut away. *This fucking insanity burning up his veins was the result.*

“Get out of my way,” Akiem growled. *Or you won’t like what I become*, he finished inside his mind.

Luceran’s hand stroked Akiem’s chest.

Akiem snatched the male's wrist, held him still, and squeezed. The king's eyes blew wide open. Good. Let him feel the strength of the beast he toyed with. On the beach, Akiem had been near death. Luceran had taken advantage of that weakness. Akiem was not weak today.

The king's infamous smile tilted his lips, and instead of backing off, he stepped in. With his free hand, he cupped Akiem's painful erection. Akiem hadn't even registered he'd become so aroused. The contact jolted another dangerous blast of lust through his veins. The king's hand was hard, his grip firm, and Akiem's body rebelled against the horror of having a male hold him there by driving his erection against Luceran's touch, seeking glorious friction.

It was wrong. He'd be shut away again. But Mother wasn't here... Nobody was here to stop this from happening. "I don't do males."

Luceran's lips cut a wicked smile, and his hand squeezed.

Akiem grabbed roughly at Luceran's pretty hair. Knotting his fingers in the locks, he yanked him forward. His mouth was on Luceran's, his thoughts racing to catch up. He didn't want to think. Luceran tasted of ice, of a cool autumnal morning before the heat of the day. He tasted like a different kind of sweetness from the one Akiem had imagined, but by the gods, he wanted more.

Luceran's tongue darted, and the male opened, pushing as much as giving, rocking with Akiem's assault. Akiem looped his free arm around his back and pulled him close, clamping his wrist between them. Luceran's hand, the one placed firmly on his cock, ground over his erection, driving a dangerous wildness through Akiem. He didn't do males—he didn't—but this...

And then the wretched memories slammed in.

Another's tongue thrust into his mouth. Hands held him down. Teeth at his throat. A dragon who smelled of metal. Images flashed, each one as real and cutting as lashes from a whip. The dragon wasn't Luceran, and he wasn't here, but Akiem's mind had conjured him up. Luceran's hand on his cock groped and grasped, taking without permission. Akiem tore free and shoved Luceran back.

Breathe.

He needed to breathe.

He couldn't. It hurt. Everywhere hurt.

Claws groping, invading.

He reeled away, hit the bedpost, and almost fell.

Luceran was there, looming over him, but it wasn't Luceran. The male was huge, his muscles slick with sweat, smelling of metal and blood. Akiem remembered praying for death, praying to any god who would listen, even Alumn, the elven goddess, to make it end, and the metal dragon had laughed sickeningly.

"Akiem..."

Luceran.

Didn't matter.

He sank down the bedpost and buried his head in his hands.

Smaller.

He wanted to be smaller, to curl into a ball and hide.

A touch sparked at his shoulder.

Akiem sprang forward, lunging at Luceran's middle. Cornered, he had no choice but to attack. This wasn't reason; it was instinct. Only, Luceran somehow caught him and yanked Akiem off balance. Akiem met the floor face first. Cool, strong hands caught his arms and held them behind his back. A knee sank into his back.

"Stop."

Heated power crawled beneath his skin. The shift. It would tear him open and make him dragon and he welcomed it. Needed it.

"Breathe," Luceran said, calmly.

Breathe. Akiem let out the breath he'd been clutching, blowing puffs of dust off the floor. His cheek hurt where splinters dug into his skin. His back hurt too from Luceran's weight pinning him down. Luceran. Nobody else. There was no one else here. From the floor, he could see the dresser, the window, the end of the bed. He'd been alone. Luceran had come. Nobody had tried to hurt him. It was all in his head, in his past.

The urge to shift faded, sinking him back inside his human-like skin.

Acting on the urges in his head, he'd attacked Luceran in more ways than one. This was the madness in him, the dragon, the truth hidden at his core like a rot. The part of him he'd never fully realized. The ugliness he saw every time he looked in a mirror.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

The weight lifted off him, and Luceran's hold on his wrists vanished. The king offered his hand. "We'll work on that, my black prince."

Black Prince.

He'd been called that before, half a world away.

Akiem winced, pushed onto his knees, and looked at Luceran's offered hand, then up at the king. His hair was all mussed up and his dragonfly cloak all shifted out of place. The color on his lips had smudged, yet still he smiled.

"Not everyone is out to hurt you, Akiem."

The words choked him and had his vision swimming. He wanted to believe that, but Luceran was fickle, his desires more so. And Akiem had pushed him, teased him, and attacked him. Any dragon worth their scales would have retaliated, but not with this strange kindness.

"I don't deserve you." He clambered to his feet without taking the king's hand and cast his gaze toward the window, avoiding Luceran's messed-up appearance. He'd have done worse to the king. Ravaged him, if they'd continued. In many ways, it was good his fucked up past had ended his lust. He wasn't supposed to be this way.

"You have no idea who I am. How can you know whether you deserve me?" The king's words pulled Akiem back into the room. Despite Luceran's upset appearance, or perhaps because of it, there was an honesty about him. "Come to the feast. Sit with me or don't, but come." He headed for the adjoining doors.

"If I don't, will you sentence me to solitude again?"

The door clicked closed behind him with the question unanswered.

Akiem drew in a breath and let it out slowly. It appeared, he was going to a feast.

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CHAPTER 7



Zane

ZANE DISCOVERED two things about dragons after luring a lower courtly type away from the docks: they're easily manipulated at the promise of sex. The second chance discovery was that they were susceptible to valerian root. His mother had taught him the benefits of the plant. It was one of the few things he remembered of her, and it served him well.

After the dragon had smuggled him into the compound and a "room" apparently meant for similar encounters, if the ready and waiting bed were any indication, Zane dropped a small vial's worth of valerian root into the dragon's cup. The beast's groping began again right after he'd taken the drink. Zane delayed, opting to pleasure the male slowly rather than have his hands provoke his bruises. He took his time unlacing the male's pants, putting some art into it, more than concerned that he might have to go through with the act, but shortly after lying back, the dragon lost interest in the positioning of Zane's hands and mouth and fell asleep.

He picked up his jacket and shirt, throwing both back on and hastily tying them in place, then headed for the window. Outside, torches lit the compound pathways across open areas. Lamplight illuminated the windows of other buildings. Beyond, a larger blocky building signaled the center of Luceran's court. The important dragons would be in there.

The second he climbed from the window, he'd be risking his head.

Moving about anywhere near the torches was suicide.

After quietly opening the window latch, he swung the pane open and leaned out, looking up. Cool evening wind wrapped its chill around him. He could just make out a downpipe, which led to the roof, and as the houses were all connected, he could, in theory, make it all the way to the central compound without anyone spotting him—unless there were dragons in the sky. He hadn't seen any, but after watching the black one sail right over his head silently as a moth, the idea of running along the rooftops at night didn't seem as foolproof as before. Still, it was up or risk the gardens, and as good as Zane was, movement among the lights was more likely to catch the eye of any dragon looking outside.

"You'd better thank me for this, Jev." He climbed onto the sill, used the open section of window to lean out, and grabbed the downpipe. The iron creaked and groaned but held. Once he was on the roof, the wind bit at his face. Flicking his collar up, he hunkered down and kept low to hide his silhouette. The rooftops were uneven, adding a challenge, but he made it to the end of the row of houses. Now all he had to do was cross to the central compound and find an open window. Once inside, finding Jevan would be difficult, but he'd worry about that if he got that far.

The dragonkin he had seen were all headed deeper into the compound, and they were dressed in fine colors. So, this was a night of celebration. All the better for Zane. He could use the distraction.

The grounds appeared clear, but that didn't mean there weren't any dragons watching. Torches didn't light all corners.

"Alumn, you owe me." He pulled his hood up, started down the pipe, and hit the ground running.

"Hey!"

He'd made it almost two-thirds of the way when the shout went up. Zane ran harder, darting around a corner and in through an open window. Clothes. Sheets folded and piled high. A laundry. Good. Breathless, he gently latched the window behind him and blew each wall lamp out. In the dark and quiet, he waited, hand on a dagger. Moments went by, and then footfalls thumped closer outside.

"Right around here," a female said. "I saw her come this way."

Her? The dragons weren't expecting an elf. They thought they'd seen one of their own, but a slimmer female.

"You smell elf?" a male asked.

Zane squeezed his eyes closed. Damn.

The painful seconds dragged on.

“Must be tonight’s entertainment.” The female laughed, her voice moving away.

He waited until their voices had faded altogether before approaching the laundry door, cracking it open, and looking out into the hallway. All the hallways looked the same. He’d only walked down a handful, and that was when he’d accompanied Killian to the execution. But dragons weren’t complicated. Social creatures, they mostly stayed together in the hub of the brood—the nest. The lowers spread out, forming their own smaller nests close to, but away from, those at the top of the food chain. Zane’s unsuspecting date sleeping off the valerian root had been a lower and an idiot. After a few questions, he’d even mentioned roughly where Clarion’s chambers were, too hungry for elf ass to care why an elf was asking about the lord.

Keeping his ears pricked, he dashed light-footed down the hall, slipping into the shadows of doorways to listen for any company. Whatever event was happening, it had them enthralled, and it gave Zane the break he needed to locate Jevan.

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CHAPTER 8



Akiem

A FEAST at the amethyst court—the court he’d grown in but was now nothing but ashes—had consisted of mountains of food, noise, dragons, blood, and sex. It had been a time to display how virile a dragon you were. Luceran’s feast was... different. The hall was just as large as the one used to behead an elf over a week ago, although the ceiling here was higher and crossed with exposed timber beams. Inside the vast space, tables lay scattered about, each topped with spreads of meats and vegetables. There had to be over two hundred dragonkin present. Clarion headed a table right of the king’s. Luceran sat at the center, surrounded by his dragons. Akiem had assumed he’d be seated off to one side, where he could observe them and have none at his back. He seemed unconcerned. If anything, he glowed among those at his table. High officials. His trusted council. Dragons Akiem avoided as much as they avoided him.

He’d arrived late. A lower had found him appropriate clothes, and he’d asked her to fix his hair in the correct fashion. The amethyst court hadn’t cared much for beautifying things. The practical was more important in times of war. Again, things were different here. Dragons wore their hair in elaborate twirls and tufts and wore uniquely cut and colored clothing. The result had him curiously self-conscious as he entered the hall. The lower had chosen for him a flattering mix of a dark purple vest—to bring out the

night colors in his hair, she'd said—and high-waisted black pants with a line of silver buttons up the outside. She'd tied much of his hair back but left enough to braid and pin alongside the loose tail. The vest left his arms exposed, revealing more skin than he would have ever dared show at such a gathering.

More than a few glances lingered too long. Most were heavy with the usual scorn, but a few had lightened appreciatively, even becoming hungry in their assessment.

He hadn't deliberately sought Luceran's attention, but as he drifted among the tables, he found he already had it. The king had eyes only for him in a room of hundreds. He'd had someone fix his hair and appearance and looked exactly as he had before Akiem had tried to rip into him. Only now a new heat lingered in the king's stare—an obvious one none could mistake for anything but attraction. Akiem's withered heart stuttered in its cage. A larger part of him wanted to shun the affection, but the shame had faded some. Luceran hadn't rejected his advances, rough as they'd been. So then males lusting after other males seemed... acceptable here, at least to Luceran. And really, his opinion was the only one that mattered.

There was no place for him at Luceran's table, he noticed. The king had asked him to sit beside him, but perhaps he hadn't meant it literally, and now Akiem found himself without a seat or a destination in a room full of dragons who would soon notice how foolish he had been to think he—an outsider—could sit among them.

He felt their gazes crawling over him again.

Clarion brushed by. The lord laughed, planted a cup in Akiem's hand, and nodded for Akiem to follow him across the room to his table, where a spare chair waited.

Akiem fought the urge to glance back at Luceran, and then wished he hadn't at the open disapproval on the king's face. A mistake, then, to go with Clarion, but he'd had little choice.

"Don't mind him." Clarion pulled the chair out for Akiem. "He thinks I'm luring you here to talk politics and maybe persuade you to my bed."

"Are you?"

All six of Clarion's close circle of dragons at the table laughed.

"No." Clarion pointed at Akiem. "Not least because I rarely do males, though I don't begrudge those who do. Besides, Luceran has a special

fondness for you, his *black prince*.” The crowd snickered. “I wouldn’t want to disrupt that.”

“I...” He’d been about to deny it. He’d always denied it since Mother had threatened to bite off his wings if he didn’t stop his wandering gazes before they became a real problem. He bowed his head in submission and agreement. Not a verbal answer, but an answer all the same.

Those at the table already assumed he and Luceran were... whatever a male pair was called. They hadn’t had a word for it in the Amethyst brood, at least no words besides *wrong* and *forbidden*.

“You’re a mysterious one, eh,” Clarion went on. “Dropped out the sky and suddenly you have Luceran in knots.” He began to fill his plate with food, as the others were also doing. “Some here don’t trust you.”

“There is no mystery,” Akiem said, his mind wandering to the food. There had been talk among the lowers of famine among the elves, but there was no sign of a food shortage here. He tentatively loaded his plate too, finding curious meats that smelled sweet and delicious. In Akiem’s own lands, amethysts ate mostly beef. Little else was left large enough to satisfy their appetite. Akiem had taken the occasional deer. Elf, too, when he could catch them.

“We don’t see many obsidian scales here. There’s one, that I know of, and he keeps to the outskirts. Just diamonds, some topaz, and a couple of amethysts.”

“Any emerald?” Akiem enquired. He picked up a slice of white meat, sniffed, and bit down. Delicious. Smooth but with enough texture to grip with his teeth—and familiar, though he couldn’t place it.

“Emerald? None.”

“Metal?” Akiem asked.

Clarion recoiled as though the question surprised him. “Metals! They died out centuries ago.”

Akiem was in no mood to correct him. Better that the metals stay far away and never bother this land or Akiem. “Plenty of elves, though.” He quickly diverted the subject from the metals before he lost his appetite.

“Elves,” Clarion snorted. “Like rats. They’re everywhere. Get into everything. I’d kill them all.”

Those around the table jeered their agreement.

Akiem had heard similar sentiments before, but this was coming from the king’s brother. No wonder Luceran hadn’t looked pleased when Clarion

had drawn Akiem over. Like all brothers, tensions existed between them. Clarion and Luceran had the same diamond-white coloring, but they seemed to share little else. Did Clarion covet the king's crown? It wouldn't be the first time a brother had sought to unseat the ruling king. Wars had been fought over less. Had this been an amethyst brood, one brother would have killed the other long before now.

He ate some more of the exotic meat, surprised to find himself ravenous.

"Good?" another dragon asked. She was diamond too. It showed in her eyes, multifaceted and shimmering. But her coloring was darker than the brothers' pale skin and light hair, her skin and hair a warmer shade of chestnut.

"Hm, what is it?"

"Elf." She grinned. "The kitchens salt and smoke the carcasses, hang them for a few days, and then slow bake it. Brings out the richness in the meat."

"Abbey here is our resident hunter-gatherer," Clarion explained. "She likes to hunt them herself. Not the ones in the city, mind. They're useful. Just the ones outside."

Akiem swallowed hard. He somehow managed to keep the broken pieces of his smile from collapsing. So the meat was elf. Didn't matter. That's how they did things here. Amethyst wasn't so different. Any elves found were killed. Some eaten, as dragon. Akiem had eaten elf, but always as dragon. Not like this. *Prepared.*

"Surprisingly nice, right?" Abbey beamed. She scooped up a few slices with her fingers. "We eat the little ones too, bones an' all. Fucking delicious."

"What was your trade in your homeland?" Clarion asked between mouthfuls of meat and wine.

Akiem reached for his wine. "I was... a flight leader." *And a prince. Briefly a king.* He kept those last thoughts to himself.

The male's eyes narrowed. He openly appraised Akiem's figure, noting his arms and their ladder-like scars. "A fighter?"

"On the wing." Akiem let him look. He'd lost weight and muscle since arriving here, and if Clarion ever saw him as dragon, he'd doubt Akiem's words then too. Luceran's reception had nearly killed him. He hadn't fared

much better since, and he healed slowly. He'd always healed slowly. He knew he appeared too slim, too *weak*. That's how things were now.

"Who'd you fight?"

The others were intrigued, all leaning forward as the gathering continued behind them. Akiem tried to sight Luceran in the crowd but couldn't find him among so many. "We fought wild dragons to the north of our territory, mostly."

"And the others?" Clarion pushed, sensing Akiem was holding back.

He rubbed his neck, trying to massage the ache away, like always.

"Bronze," he said, tasting blood, a memory.

"Metal?" Clarion's eyes widened. "You fought fucking metals?"

His insides grew cold. "It didn't start out that way. We were allies, but the bronze were difficult."

"Shit," Abbey said. "Now I know why you're scarred like you are." Her gaze made the marks on his arms sizzle.

The ache grew. They had no fucking idea why he was scarred.

"What are they like?" she asked.

More wine went down to fill the growing hole inside, but instead, it only made him feel more empty. "What do you think?"

"Big," another dragon said.

"We heard they'd all died?" Abbey asked.

"No, or maybe they have now. I don't know. Don't care. I left and..." He felt teeth pierce his skull, the memory so damn real he almost gasped. Claws scraped his back, his wings. Teeth tore muscle and scale from his body. Mud tried to choke him, blind him, and deafen him all at once. It clung to his wings, and through it all, the bronze held him down. Always held him down.

Akiem's hand shook. He pressed it against the tabletop.

"Is that why you came here? To get away from them?"

Akiem stood so quickly his chair toppled backward and hit the floor, startling nearby dragons. He scooped up his drink. "Excuse me."

"Hey—" A hand grabbed him.

Akiem didn't think. There wasn't time to. He swung for Clarion, using his left fist, so it was never going to land well. It clipped the male's jaw and startled him enough to have him fall backward, and in doing so, he caught Akiem's arm and yanked, pulling Akiem down, eye to eye.

The diamond's eyes sizzled with restrained rage. "You're mine."

Akiem bared his teeth and yanked his arm free. “I’m not your bitch—or your king’s. Threaten me again and I’ll rip your wings off while you sleep. I’ve mauled far worse than you, *bitch*.”

The lord blinked, frowned, and barked a torrent of laughter. He picked up his cup and drank deeply while the others laughed at the hilarious thought of Akiem beating Clarion.

Akiem left the table before he could get drawn into another brawl—with the king’s brother, no less. He searched for Luceran, but his attention snagged on the elf making her way into the room. Her flowing pale gown rippled like water over her bare feet. Warm honeyed skin glowed. She didn’t look real. Akiem blinked, expecting her to ghost away. But she stayed, walking along the outside of the room, drawing attention her way. She smelled of the forest at dawn, of wood and wildness. There wasn’t a dragon here who didn’t see her.

Then she stopped, faced the room, opened her mouth, and sang. The sound she produced was smooth, melodic, haunting, and spellbinding, and all at once, Akiem had to leave. She didn’t know the dragons feasted on strips of her kin. Nor did she know she wouldn’t make it out alive, or if she did know, then all the more reason for Akiem not to stay, because if she knew she’d die here, that made her far braver than him and worthier of life.

The hallways all looked the same.

Akiem took a few random turns, stumbled down steps, passed from one building to another where they’d been knocked into one long compound. He was sure most dragons knew the twists and turns like they did their own tails, but Akiem was lost. He didn’t care. Walking was getting away. Like at the docks, he just had to keep moving to escape the memories. Just keep moving.

A hooded figure blocked his path.

He lifted his head.

Red hair.

Green eyes.

Elf.

Akiem frowned. Had his thoughts conjured the elf from the docks here? “What—”

The elf’s green eyes widened. He bolted left, down another hallway.

Akiem lunged after him out of instinct, mostly. Few dragons could resist a chase.

The elf's red hair might as well have been a flag in the torchlit corridors. As he ran, his hood fell back, making his long hair fan out behind him. His footfalls were almost silent. And damn, he was fast. Akiem tossed his cup and ran harder. Just like at the docks, if this one came across a less friendly dragon, he'd surely be killed. Akiem wouldn't allow that to happen. For the elf back in the compound, for the elves who had died to feed gluttonous dragons. This red-headed fool wasn't dying as well.

"Stop..." he called, but not too loud. Most of the dragons were at the feast, but it would take just one to spot them and raise the alarm.

The elf was outrunning him, bouncing off corners like water flowing down a drain. Shit, he was too damn fast. He darted around corners faster than Akiem could keep up, until the flag of red hair fluttered out like a torch and was gone. The hallway came to a dead end. No elf. Four closed doors, two on either side.

Akiem let a smile lift his lips. He sniffed the air, scenting elf, but that didn't tell him what door the intruder had taken. "I don't want to hurt you." Of course, all dragons would say the same, and little would convince this elf that Akiem spoke the truth. "You shouldn't be here."

Why was he here? This was the last place an elf would willingly come. Unless he'd escaped from inside the compound? Perhaps he'd been meant to be part of the entertainment too—and die for it.

Akiem's patience frayed. Games were one thing, but he was trying to help this fool escape dragons.

He opened the first door to the left and found an empty room inside. No furniture. A closed window. Nothing. The first door to his right in the hallway opened to a storage room, its air musty. The elf hadn't gone inside. That left the two at the end. He tried the left. Locked. The right door then.

Akiem closed his hand around the handle. He cracked the door an inch and smelled the fresh, woodsy scent of the traditional elven homes. Akiem swung the door open. One step, another. Darkness greeted him. Sheets covered the outlines of a chair and couch. The rest of the furniture was difficult to make out.

Akiem entered, hands up. "I'm not armed."

"You don't need to be," the voice said from the far corner. Akiem couldn't make out where the elf was among the layered shadows.

"True enough." He lowered his hands.

Voices sounded from far down the hallway. Akiem swallowed. "I'm going to shut this door. If I leave it open, another dragon will likely discover you."

The elf didn't reply.

Akiem toed the door closed and then backed against it, plunging himself into the darkness. He found himself in a dangerous position. As man, he was vulnerable to the elf's sharp daggers. The elf had better night vision too. He knew exactly where Akiem stood, whereas Akiem had yet to pinpoint him among the piles of junk.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said again, finding the words truer the more he said them.

"Why chase me?"

Akiem zeroed in on the crouched shape behind the couch. "Because there are five hundred dragons in this compound who do."

The elf straightened, armed with a dagger in each hand. Cloaked in shades of gray, he was no less intriguing than he had been at the dock. It seemed impossible that they should meet again, just as impossible as an elf roaming a dragon compound.

"Why are you here?" Akiem asked. "Are you looking for someone?"

As Akiem's eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw the elf smile.

As he emerged from behind the couch, Akiem took in the make of him. He wore softer leathers than those he'd worn at the execution. They clung to him and kept his profile lean, all the better for infiltrating dragon strongholds. The daggers would no doubt be sharp when he stabbed Akiem—which was surely about to happen.

Akiem lifted his chin.

Still, the elf strode forward, unafraid, and the closer he got, the more his features sharpened in the dark. He had smooth freckle-marked skin, pale in a way that made him glow instead of making him appear sickly. The hair was a mess of ruffled lengths. Some locks licked his jaw, some fell to his shoulders, like he'd hacked at it himself.

The blade was at Akiem's throat and the wall at his back before he could draw his next breath. He didn't fight and kept his hands out, submitting.

"You're not afraid?" the elf whispered, eyes narrowing. His breath was cool where it touched Akiem's chin.

"Of death? No."

The elf's eyebrow arched. "You could have chosen *not* to chase me, to let me go, but here we are."

He hadn't had much choice. Run and he'd give chase. The instinct was ingrained into all dragons.

The elf's eyes flashed a warning. "What do you want?"

The dagger dug in; whether intentionally or not, the blade still bit and stung, drawing blood. Akiem did have a choice, and he decided now. He brought his arm up, fast enough to knock the elf's hand back, and locked his fingers around the elf's wrist. Snagging the other dangerously armed hand, Akiem pulled and turned, slamming the elf into the wall, his wrists captured high. The elf cried out. One dagger slipped free, and then, as Akiem pushed in, drilling his glare into the elf's, the elf relinquished. It clattered to the floor, leaving the elf disarmed, but his kind always had more blades on them.

Akiem had planned to pull back, to show him he truly had no intention of hurting him, that he'd just wanted the blade away from his neck, but a curious sensation had overcome him. The elf's breathless panting from the run brushed his chest against Akiem's. Their breaths mingled. His tasted fresh, clean.

"It appears I am at your mercy." The elf's voice had turned sly, and a crooked smile rested on his lips, asking for things it shouldn't.

Akiem slowed his own breathing, aware that his heart hadn't slowed at all. If anything, it raced faster than before. He licked his lips, saw the elf's gaze pin to his mouth, and froze beneath the scrutiny.

"You smell of wine and revelry, dragon. Perhaps you should start thinking more with your head." The elf blinked slowly, pinched his bottom lip between his teeth, and let it spring back. "And less with your cock."

If Akiem hadn't been aroused before, he was now, in this dark storage room with an elf pinned to the wall. Nobody need know. Even he didn't fully believe it. Was this wild elf also aroused? Akiem didn't smell fear. He knew fear. The red-haired temptation with his wrists pinned overhead was a long way from being afraid. That alone teased Akiem's instincts to provoke a reaction. Who was this elf that he wasn't afraid of dragons and males in dark rooms?

"As much as seeing you struggle with your desires is a fascinating journey into dragon psyche, I do have somewhere I need to be, so if you

don't mind..." He pulled at Akiem's hold, a token gesture. He could have pulled harder.

He should let him go. If he didn't, he'd be no different from his kin. But there was something between them. He knew there was. It had sparked to life when the damn elf had winked at him, and it had burned a little more at the docks. Fate kept putting this one right in his path.

"Dragon, kiss me or let me go. I'm sure we both have lives that need us in them—"

His lips were soft, and with Akiem brushing his against them, they were also blessedly silent. The elf parted his mouth enough to grant permission. Akiem didn't move. He wasn't sure he could. If he took what the elf offered, what did that make him?

The elf leaned in, sealed their mouths, and forced his tongue in. Suddenly breathless and robbed of thought, Akiem fell into the kiss. By the great gods, he needed this. The gentleness made him ache. It wasn't like any other time, with any dragon. It wasn't like anything else he'd known. The elf came alive against him, his mouth and body hungry. He tried to pull forward, to tempt Akiem in, but this... just this kiss... was enough. It was just... right.

The kiss ended like all things must, but it ended slow, full of promise and want, as though it were a beginning and not an end. Lust shone in the elf's eyes. In this dark room, the elf was a forbidden delight, a secret, a wonder.

"Did you enjoy my gift, dragon?" the elf purred.

Even the words he used, and how he spoke them, drove Akiem to distraction. He wet his lips, careful to keep his voice level. "More than you know."

"Good. Here's another."

The elf slammed his knee up, exploding agony through Akiem's balls and up his back. He might have sworn, but he certainly cried out and stumbled backward, reaching for the couch so he didn't drop to his knees and throw up the horrid meat he'd unwittingly eaten at the feast.

The elf was out the door and running.

Akiem staggered out the doorway. He clung to its frame, the pain sapping him of his strength. He wouldn't go after that elf until he could at least see through the throbbing stars crowding his vision. And by then, he'd hopefully be gone, destined for freedom and not Clarion's chopping block.

He still didn't know his name.

His Red. The one whose kiss had been a fucking delight and not a horror. He touched his lips, tasting elf in a way that went against everything he knew and everything he'd been taught. The kiss. Gods, the wild kiss. He waited for the shame to smother him, but it didn't come. He waited for the past to crowd close and make him weep. He felt nothing but heated desire to have *more*. Akiem had never relished the feel of a knee in the balls, but this one he'd never forget.

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CHAPTER 9



Zane

PLAN A HADN'T WORKED, but with some modification, it might. He'd first snared a lower. That had gotten him inside the compound, but the place was too big. However, as he'd searched for Jevan, he'd also somehow, inexplicably, snared the king's new toy. That had seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. That was the only reason he couldn't get the kiss out of his head. The same reason he couldn't stop thinking about how the dragon had tasted. Delicious, with a hint of spicy warmth that had Zane's unruly cock twitching. But he didn't do dragon. His enjoyment of the kiss had been a ruse to get away, nothing more. If he hadn't kneed him in the nuts, he'd have ended up dragon food. He'd done the right thing.

So, to Plan B:

Use the king's new toy to get to Clarion and/or find Jevan. As terrifying as the dragon was, he seemed reasonable as man, and if Zane had to fuck him to get what he wanted, it wouldn't exactly be a chore. He hadn't had much of a chance to get his hands on him, but what he had seen in the dark had been pleasing enough. The male's biceps had held a defined curve while stringing Zane up high. The dragon's smile had briefly appeared, softening his entire face. Without the smile, he had a severe intensity to him, like his glare could melt metal. He probably could melt metal, as

dragon. As long as Zane didn't forget the monster he was, everything would be fine.

He paced his room.

It would all be fine.

He just had to find him again. Seduce him. Get Jevan's whereabouts from him. The rest he'd deal with when it happened.

There was one place they had crossed paths before. A place seduction was expected.

He'd have to win his trust.

Make him believe he was genuinely into him.

"Easy enough," Zane told his lodgings.

The dragon was definitely interested in Zane, but if he gave him what he wanted too soon, he might miss his chance to get answers. No, this had to be a seduction. A work of art. Not a dirty fuck against the wall, as much as the idea had Zane's already alert cock hardening further. Alumn be damned, this wasn't personal. This couldn't be personal. Not with a dragon. Get Jevan. Get the hell out of this wretched city. He owed Jevan that. And fucking a dragon would be the price.

A knock sounded at his door. He'd almost missed it, along with the sound of boots hitting the boards.

"Yes?" he called.

"Zane, it's Arlo..."

Gods, yes.

Zane opened the door. Arlo was dressed in his bar attire—plain black pants and a white shirt.

"Is everything all right?" Zane asked, already picturing him out of his work attire.

"Yes, fine. I wanted to ask—"

Zane caught him by the shirt, pulled him in, and kissed him up against the wall, using a boot to kick the door closed beside them. Thank Alumn's light, the male's hands were on him instantly, roughing up his shirt, trying to yank it free from his pants.

Zane chased his mouth and delighted in Arlo chasing him back, going so far as to groan as tiny sharp teeth nipped at his neck. Zane pulled his shirt open, sending a few buttons scattering. He spread his hands over Arlo's chest and ran his tongue down and around a nipple, sucking it before riding down the ridge of his abs. He was too slim and lithe to be dragon, not

that Zane was comparing. He wasn't. Just an observation. He unlaced Arlo's pants and had his cock in hand, then between his lips and over his tongue.

"Fuck," Arlo spat, thumping his head back against the wall. His fingers sank into Zane's hair. "Oh gods, Alumn... don't."

"Don't?" Zane mumbled around the mouthful.

"Do!"

Zane rolled his tongue, applying pressure, and used his hand on the hot, hard shaft while his mouth did the rest.

"Fuck, Zane."

Please do. Zane straightened, kissed Arlo hard, and claimed him, working the slickened cock against his palm and through his fingers. Arlo rocked, hips thrusting. He threw an arm around Zane's shoulders and fucked his hand, grunting in a way Zane never would have expected from him. When he kissed him again, he fucking devoured him. His cock in his hand, his tongue tangled with Zane's, his body trapped. Arlo pulled free, flung his head back, and came so fucking hard Zane couldn't help but grind his own throbbing cock against his thigh.

"Zane, please..." Arlo shoved his pants down, turned to face the wall, presenting the curve of his back, and thrust out a tight, round ass, which Zane remembered well.

"Wait." Zane rummaged in the dresser drawer, found the oil, and spread it over himself and Arlo's crevice. He sank two fingers in to help ease the tight ring of muscles.

"Goddess, *just do it.*"

Zane took his arousal in hand and held Arlo's thigh as he guided himself into the tightness he needed so desperately he couldn't think straight. Arlo arched his back and rocked his hips, opening himself, and Zane closed his eyes, easing in deeper. Pleasure was a cruel tease, and he chased it down, falling into a rhythm that had him clutching Arlo to him, his chest to Arlo's back. He fucked him until he lost all sense of himself, the room, the world—all but the damn dragon he'd kissed in the dark. He imagined that kiss again, reliving it in exquisite detail. The taste of fear on the male's lips, a fear the dragon had overcome. He was a monster, a beast of flame and claw, and still he'd kissed as though he were broken and didn't know how to fix himself.

By Alumn, Zane wanted to show him how, to make him whole again, and he didn't damn well care that he wasn't supposed to think that way about anyone, especially a dragon. He wanted that monster in his arms, beneath him, over him, in every way. He wanted him to spill his seed and whisper Zane's name in a kiss, just like the one they'd shared in that dark room.

He came suddenly and hard, pleasure uncoiling and snapping, spooling free, leaving him panting over Arlo's golden back. He kissed and nipped at Arlo's shoulder.

Braced against the wall by a single hand, he closed his eyes and saw the dragon beneath him, his back rippling with strength. Alumn, it couldn't happen soon enough.



THE DRAGON WASN'T at the docks the next night or the night after. Plenty of dragons came and went, many from Luceran's court. None were the dragon he wanted to see, and none sparked the same breathless fluttering in his chest. Their numbers tapered off, and by mid-month, the market trade and the dragons had all but dried up. It ebbed and flowed like this, a trader told him. On the next full moon, the dragons would return.

There was no other way to reach him. He knew a way inside the compound, but the place was much bigger than he'd anticipated, and he'd only gotten out without anyone seeing him by luck. Chancing it again felt like one chance too many.

Zane walked the dockside, deliberately close to the water's edge. There were traders here. The area was lit well enough. He was safe, and perhaps that was the problem. The dragon had so far shown up twice, and each time when Zane had been running headlong into trouble. Perhaps he should play the damsel in distress again to see if the dragon emerged from the shadows.

Of course, this was all part of the plan.

None of these *urges* were personal.

He stopped by an old ship's anchor tie, the concrete projection shaped like a large mushroom rising from the dockside. There weren't any ships at the docks. Ships hadn't sailed for centuries. Some lay rotting in the channel. None of those huge human machines, whether it be cars, planes, or ocean

liners, moved in the air or on the ocean anymore. Zane had only seen those human things in water-stained antique books belonging to the elves who paid him to work.

Work he sorely needed.

He had enough coin for another week's lodgings, and then, if he didn't find work, he'd have to resort to stealing like the little elf the dragon had caught.

His memory chose that moment to supply the image of the twelve young'un's being led to their fates with bags over their heads.

By the next full moon, that bastard Killian might have caught a new batch. How the sick asshole slept at night was beyond Zane. At least Zane was *trying*. When he got Jevan back, they'd damn well tell the world what was happening here. Let Killian pay his way out of that scandal.

Zane picked up a stone from the walkway and tossed it into the black water some fifteen feet below. It plopped in and disappeared beneath the surface. The tide was in, slopping about the dock wall, stirring up salty odours. Looking up, he followed the water's rippling surface out into the bay. Farther on, half a world away, were there other elves and dragons? The king's new toy had come from *out there*. He'd flown in from that impenetrable darkness. Had he come for a reason, or had he been running from something? It was said no dragon could fly across the ocean. One had. Something or someone must have driven or pulled him here.

"A lovely view." His unmistakable voice, the accent sharp, set Zane's blood pumping.

Zane could see farther out to sea than the dragon, and he found the view bleak. "There are better views." He didn't dare turn. If he turned, the dragon might be there, or he might discover he'd imagined him, and he wasn't sure which he wanted more. "I see only darkness out there."

The dragon stepped up to the dock's edge beside him. He was taller, something Zane had forgotten in the dark room during that kiss. It was dark here too, but a different darkness, licked by the occasional torch. The dragon's hair fanned around his shoulders. Torchlight set some of its strands ablaze, while the rest fell in inky lines. His profile held all the stern edges of typical dragons. Jawbone and cheekbone equally sharp. Zane knew he could be vicious. He'd seen him kill two dragons. At a glance, he looked like a ruthless killer, but there was more in his golden eyes, more he *chose* to hide.

“What’s your name?” Zane asked.

The dragon cocked his head and smiled but didn’t turn to look. He didn’t answer either. Fine. Two could play that game. Zane had no intention of giving up his name either. Names were personal. They didn’t have to go there. This was the plan: seduce, get information on Jev, and get him out before Clarion or Luceran got wind of this.

If Luceran discovered him here... Shit, what the hell was Zane doing? Luceran would kill him, maybe the dragon too. If Jevan knew he was here with a dragon, *Jevan* would kill him.

He sank his hand into his pocket and caught the locket in his palm. Jevan wasn’t here. This had to be done. He needed this dragon to open up and fall for him. He looked up at the clouds passing over a waxing moon. Time was not on his side.

“I keep asking myself why you were inside the compound,” the dragon mused, his gaze locked on the faraway ocean.

“So you thought you’d visit the docks again to get your answer and maybe tap some elf ass while you’re here?”

His shoulders stiffened. Ah, this wasn’t the dark room, and such things said out in the open made him uncomfortable.

Zane glanced behind them. Others were here, although nobody cared about the elf and dragon standing beside the water. But the dragon cared. Maybe he was shy, or maybe it was more than that. Luceran had well-paid spies among the elves. Perhaps the dragon had already been punished for coming here? Yet he’d come back.

Zane watched the dragon’s tension hold him. They couldn’t do this out in the open. “We can go somewhere else, if you’d prefer?”

His shoulders dropped. “I’d prefer that, yes,” he said, then quickly added, “To talk. Nothing else.”

Nothing else. Sure. He’d come down to the docks, hunting for an elf to talk to. Did he even know he was lying? “Take the north street. At the top, where the road splits, go left at the fork. There’s a bar along there. You can’t miss it.”

“A bar?” Now he deigned to look Zane in the eyes.

Zane blinked. Alumn, he was a pretty dragon beneath all the scowling. “A bar. Where you buy drinks and spend time with friends. You know, *a bar.*”

“Fine, yes, a bar.”

He had no idea what a bar was. What kind of backward wasteland did he come from where kin couldn't get together to drink and relax?

"Will there be others?" he asked, dark lashes shuttering his gold-rimmed eyes.

"Others?"

"Elves?"

"Yes. It's a bar. You'll be fine." Zane smiled, more to ease the dragon's anxiety than anything else. "Wear the hood."

He left the dragon at the dockside. Maybe he wouldn't come. Zane ignored the sharp bite of nerves working to undermine his confidence. Of course the dragon would come. Zane's lovers *always* came.



ZANE SAT at the table tucked against the side of the room, the one beneath the unlit lamp. Usually, he'd plant himself in the middle of the room to annoy Jevan by attracting too much attention, but tonight wasn't about open flirting. Tonight he had a target.

Fifteen minutes later, a cloaked dragon walked in. Even though he wasn't as large as others of his kind, he had that undeniable build that could never pass for elf. The air changed, as though an ocean storm had poured in through the door. A storm that could destroy everything and everyone here. There was no hiding what he was.

The crowd quieted, but these were street elves; they'd seen it all, and a dragon in their bar barely raised an eyebrow.

Zane watched him scan the crowd before he finally headed over, pulled out a chair, and sat. His every move was precise, as though he calculated exactly how he presented himself to others.

Zane waved, caught the bartender's eye, and held up two fingers. Arlo wasn't on shift. A blessing. Things might have gotten awkward if he had been.

"Do they know you well here?" the dragon asked, his accent clipping each word.

"No, I'm just passing through." Nobody knew him well. Nobody but Jevan.

The dragon lowered his hood and leaned back in the chair, making it creak. He'd drawn more than a few eyes, and not just because he was dragon. Zane had seen him at court, dressed in black. He'd thought the color suited him. His dark presence beside Luceran's light had left an impression, but that was before he'd seen him in purple beneath the torchlight while Zane had fled through the compound, the dragon giving chase. The same purple color he sported now, in a dark purple button-down shirt over dark pants. He looked like an angry storm trapped in a human-shaped bottle.

The dragon's gaze flicked over elves at other tables. It wasn't fear, but there was definite anxiety in seeing them.

"They won't rat you out. They're elves. We have some honor left." *Unlike dragons.*

The dragon's slightly raised eyebrow suggested he'd heard the unspoken words.

"Why were you at the compound?" He asked, sliding his gaze back to Zane and pinning it to his face.

The scrutiny set Zane's nerves twitching. The dragon barely blinked his golden eyes, and when he did, it seemed deliberate, not involuntary. He was accustomed to wearing a mask, the one that had slipped during the kiss they'd shared.

A stocky elf delivered the drink and eyed the dragon like she was trying to figure out how to tell him he wasn't welcome here without losing her head.

"Why are you so concerned about my presence at the compound?" Zane dug around for his coin pouch, but the dragon got there first. He slipped four coins into the server's hand, paying double, ensuring her smile and her silence.

"Old habits," the dragon explained before sipping his drink. After tasting it—probably for poison—he drank deep. His throat bobbed, drawing Zane's eye.

His mind wandered back to the dark room, when the dragon had pinned his wrists to the wall. He suspected the dragon had wanted the kiss to travel down his neck and other places. Zane shifted in the chair and took a drink, veering his thoughts off their path before they showed on his face.

"What were you, before you came here? Your trade, I mean, if you had one..." Zane asked.

The dragon set the drink down. "Flight leader... Guardian. Executioner." A shadow darkened his eyes. He had more to say but no further explanation came. Guardian and executioner to whom? Then he'd killed elves? It was hardly a surprise. But after the chase, he'd said he was trying to help Zane escape. Why would a hunter help its prey?

"And what is *your* trade?" the dragon asked.

"Mercenary. Bodyguard. Among other things."

"You're paid to fight for a cause not your own?"

"Something like that." Paid to do many things, although never sex. The dragon didn't need to know that. This was beginning to feel like an interrogation, on both sides. He needed to steer the conversation back to more pleasurable things.

"Do you... lodge nearby?"

"I do." Zane's lips twitched. He leaned on the table, shortening the distance between them. In the shadows, the dragon's eyes held a shimmer, often referred to as *dragonsight*. Some saw in different tones and shades than others. Did this one see Zane differently? "Do you have something in mind, dragon?"

From the heated sizzle in those eyes, he had a lot on his mind, and much of it indecent. Would he really be this easy?

He didn't seem to know how to answer, and Zane stole the moment to drink deeply, finishing the tankard in one. With nothing left to say, he stood and headed for the door, with the dragon in tow. His lodgings were a few doors down, and he was aware of every single step the dragon took behind him, but the closer they came to his temporary home, the more Zane's heart fluttered. Taking a dragon to his private space was a terrible idea, but where else could one fuck a dragon around here?

He continued on, passing his lodgings, and headed up the street where the oil lamps flickered, fighting back more shadows.

"Where are we going?" The dragon's steps drew closer.

"You'll see."

That nip of anxiety returned. He ignored it, like he had before, and reminded himself this was necessary and nothing more. An empty building lay ahead, one of many abandoned high-rises along this street. Once, it had climbed high into the sky, but the top floors had long ago tumbled into the street. Now the upper floors gaped at the stars.

Zane vaulted over a broken barrier and headed inside.

“Elf?”

He turned. The dragon’s eyes churned molten in the low light as he waited outside the barrier.

Zane opened his arms in invitation and backed up a few steps. For a few seconds, the dragon didn’t move, which was wise. Following anyone into a dark, abandoned building ranked up there with sheer stupidity, but he was dragon, and Zane an elf. *He* had the power here. The dragon must have realized the same, because he climbed over the barrier and started up the steps.

The stairs climbed higher and higher, dog-legging back in a large open spiral, forming the spine of the building. Grass and vines had tried to claim the walls, rooting in cracks and holes. Broken windows afforded ever-higher views of the half-abandoned city. The entire building was hazardous, but whenever Jev inevitably had them returning to Bayston every year, Zane always came to this tower. It had stood for hundreds of years and outlived the humans. It wasn’t going anywhere tonight.

Finally, the stairwell opened to an exposed floor and star-glittered sky. Old concrete struts acted like columns, holding up a ceiling no longer there. Rusted steel rods, bent from huge forces, made for excellent grab handles as Zane picked his way across the open floor. The air smelled sweeter up here, away from the oil lamps and ocean. Zane breathed in, filling his lungs, and approached the concrete pillar near the far corner and the edge.

The dragon drew up alongside him and stopped at the half wall. One more step and he’d plummet the eight stories to the street below.

“Now that’s a view,” Zane said.

Bayston’s streets sparkled far below. The city had been altered over the years—added to, patched up, built around, repurposed. Some blocks, the unsafe ones, lay dormant, like the one they stood in now, but most shone. The city had once bustled with humans and their wheeled traveling machines. It didn’t seem possible looking at it now.

The dragon stared out over the lamplit cityscape. The wind teased his long hair away from his stern face. Reading him was nearly impossible. His mask was too good. But the view didn’t seem to impress him, and Zane’s fluttering nervousness returned.

“Every time I pass through Bayston, I come up here,” Zane said, then regretted it. This wasn’t supposed to be personal, yet here he was, bringing

the dragon to one of his favorite secret places. He should have taken him to his lodgings and fucked him.

The dragon looked down, teetering on the edge.

Zane folded his arms to keep from reaching out like a fool. “Could you shift before hitting the ground?” he asked carefully.

The dragon’s cheek twitched. He met Zane’s gaze. A hungry intensity burned in his eyes again. Zane’s heart stuttered. Was this what all his prey felt like before he devoured them?

Zane’s breathing sharpened, adrenaline kicking in. The dragon likely sensed it all. Maybe bringing him up here really had been the wrong thing to do. Nobody but Jevan would miss Zane if he met with an *accident*, and Jev was hardly in a position to fight for another dead elf.

The dragon stepped forward.

Zane instinctively backed up.

Another step. The dragon’s eyes blazed.

Zane’s back bumped against the concrete pillar. He should run, like he had in the compound, but the dragon was blocking the only exit. This feeling, though, wasn’t fear. He didn’t want to run. The sensations pouring through him had everything to do with *anticipation*. The kiss in the dark room had lit Zane’s match, and now he was yearning to feel that heat between them again.

The dragon crowded close, his scent tantalizing, his presence too big to think around. His fingers touched Zane’s. Cold metal landed in Zane’s palm. He looked down. Three coins rested in his hand.

“Service me, elf.”

His words threw more fuel on the fire, drenching Zane in lust. He’d never been ordered in such a manner, and never by a dragon. The coins in his hand warmed. Payment for sex. With a dragon. Fuck, Zane would do him for free just to hear him growl those orders again.

He pocketed the coins and rested a hand on the dragon’s chest. He couldn’t feel his heart, not through the layers of leather, but his radiating warmth wrapped around Zane like his solid arms might. Zane ventured his hand lower, feeling his way over the flat, hard plain of his stomach, then around and over his hip. Beneath the cloak and clothes, the dragon was made for strength, for fighting his way to the top, but all that muscle and masculinity was frustratingly hidden from Zane’s touch. He wanted to tear into the buckles and straps, rip his layers off, and suck him dry.

Zane lifted his gaze, bringing his mouth close to the dragon's, now set in a firm, stubborn line, and whispered, "What will you have me do, dragon?"

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CHAPTER 10



Akiem

WHAT AKIEM WANTED WAS to turn him around, take the mischievous red-haired elf up on the signals he broadcasted, and fuck him against the concrete pillar, raw and fast like Akiem had been denied his whole life. But it wasn't that simple. Nothing was ever that simple.

He hadn't been able to get Red out of his head since that terrible kiss, like the damn elf had somehow infected him with yet more madness. It couldn't be Akiem. He didn't have these thoughts, not for elves. He couldn't. Could he? But this one... This one was different. Red had been at the docks again, soliciting certain pleasures.

Pleasures Akiem didn't need or want.

But he'd gone to the docks, hoping to find Red waiting there. His wretched heart had leaped at the sight of him near the water's edge, the wind in his hair, his gaze cast out toward the endless sea and Akiem's home.

This was forbidden.

This wasn't for Akiem.

It couldn't be for many, many reasons.

What will you have me do, dragon?

And now they were here, on the roof of the world, this elf's secret place.

The lust wasn't fading. He couldn't bury it like he had before. He'd hidden his desires all his life. He'd had little choice. It was survival. Now... this red-haired devil had undone it all with a single kiss, and he kept pulling on Akiem's strings, unraveling him.

Akiem closed his eyes and shuddered out a sigh.

What will you have me do, dragon?

The elf—Red—waited, his mouth tantalizingly close, his body pressed closer. Every word Red said was designed to undo him. Akiem closed his hands into fists, fighting every instinct—some to stay, some to go, some to shove the elf onto his knees and have his mouth on his most intimate parts. He didn't move. There was Luceran to consider. If the king discovered this... But it was nothing—a transaction. Coins had changed hands. This was a service.

Red's hand found Akiem's clenched right fist. His fingers peeled his fist open, then slipped inside, locking their hands together. Akiem looked down at their entwined fingers. Red's little finger was tattooed. A little swirl of black ink, like a ribbon around his finger. The city noises found them, tossed their way on a breeze that shifted locks of the elf's red hair over his eyes. Still, this didn't feel real.

This was different. So very different. That elven hand in his had ripped him open.

The elf's eyes were full of want, need, and terrible understanding.

Nobody understood Akiem. He didn't even understand himself and never had. He knew that now. He'd been someone else for others, for a queen and mother who had never loved him. For a broodbrother who barely saw him. For his amethyst brood who took from him and never gave. For the life of a prince in a faraway court in which he had never truly belonged.

"Is this what you want?" Red brought Akiem's hand to his own arousal straining inside his tight pants. The touch—feeling a solid rod of maleness in his palm—scorched parts of him he hadn't known existed.

The elf arched a russet eyebrow. He stood on his toes, hooked his free arm around Akiem's neck, and met his mouth. Gently, at first, like it had been in the compound. A careful test. Warm, soft lips created a raging fire inside him, where before there had always been a hollowness. Gods, he was so fucking afraid of this.

Red's mouth taunted, urging him to open, to submit. If he gave back, the raging want running wild through him would make this unstoppable. His

need was a breathless, maddening thing, and it wanted out.

The elf's tongue teased. Akiem opened, feeling himself falling, as if the world were tipping him over the edge. Red had tipped everything upside down. He kissed him back, slowly at first, so damn carefully, afraid of it all, afraid of what it meant.

But this didn't mean anything.

He'd paid.

Emotion—feelings—didn't come into it.

Red's hand rose to Akiem's hair, fingers cradling the nape of Akiem's neck, and then his other hand stroked down the curve of his back, settling over his ass, where Red gripped, claiming him.

It wasn't like before, with dragons, with Luceran, or with the worst of them all—the monster of a male who had torn Akiem open.

His breath caught, the kiss coming apart. Fear and madness and memories pushed in, but the elf's mouth found his jawline, and his tongue swirled and his little teeth nipped. Akiem turned his head away, inviting more of the touch that chased away the dark he'd thought was a permanent part of him. He wanted to touch him but didn't know where to start. He knew what he liked, but was Red the same? Were elves the same? How did one pleasure an elf?

Red caught his hand and placed it on his own ass.

"Right there is good," he mumbled against Akiem's neck, just below his ear, as though sensing Akiem's thoughts. Then he mouthed that spot below Akiem's ear, sucking just enough to shoot a dart of lust straight to Akiem's cock. He gasped, giving himself away. Too late to hide now. This elf impossibly already knew more about him than anyone else alive.

Akiem cradled the male's erection against his palm. So strange, to feel another male's desire for him. So good to feel its straining hardness, so very like his own.

The elf eased back, throwing both arms over Akiem's shoulders, and looked him in the eye. It didn't need to be said that Akiem hadn't done this before, not willingly, but Red wasn't mocking him. The look in his eyes fucking understood and made this all kinds of right—and so wrong.

He lowered his gaze, auburn lashes fluttering, then slid down Akiem's body to rest on his knees, putting his head at waist height.

Akiem swallowed. His arousal, evident in the bulge upsetting the line of his pants, seemed so shameful. There was wetness too. His mouth

tightened. Shame tried to crawl beneath his skin, but the elf planted both hands on his hips, holding him steady, and looked up, licking his lips in anticipation.

Red's elf-quick fingers plucked the laces of Akiem's pants free. He pushed the waistband down, but only an inch, making the pants rest low on Akiem's hips.

Akiem ran his fingers through Red's messy hair. The male responded by mouthing over Akiem's hipbone. Akiem's fingers tightened. The elf's tongue flicked and probed, teasing a path downward.

He was temptation in male form. A prize, a dream, and everything about him made Akiem forget how to breathe. Yet breathe he did, too fast, too obvious, his emotions spread bare for the elf to see, and he didn't care. Couldn't think to care. His want was visceral. His cock throbbed. His heart pounded. And he didn't care to hide it. His secret was safe with a nothing elf who sold sex to dragons.

Back home, he would have been punished for admiring another male and killed for touching an elf this way. That made all of this impossible. He didn't want to make sense of any of it. The old Akiem did not do this. *Couldn't* do this. But he was new, different, and so was this.

Red slid his hands up Akiem's thighs, his constant crooked smile a wicked delight. He paused there, his hands on Akiem's hips, his eyes full of lust. He waited, because he knew—somehow *he knew* Akiem needed control. Akiem nodded once and audibly swallowed.

Red's tongue poked into the corner of his mouth as he worked free the remaining laces of his pants. Akiem's smile parted, growing.

"Laughing at me, dragon?"

"Admiring." It was all he could say. If he said too much, the elf would know how much this meant—a weakness he couldn't afford to reveal.

This should have been an easy transaction, but nothing about the elf on his knees and about to service Akiem's cock was easy.

Red freed Akiem's cock and wrapped his strong, warm fingers around the straining length. The contact shocked Akiem's thoughts into silence, making him forget about everything but the tight feel of his hand. The elf purred at the back of his throat, a sound Akiem had never heard from an elf before. Akiem's heart hammered louder, if such a thing were possible. The elf knew what he was doing, and Akiem's arousal was obvious, although having it exposed to this elf was another layer of vulnerability entirely.

He'd never had another male touch him willingly. Not like this. But he'd wanted it. Gods, he'd ached for it since he was a kit. It was the first secret he'd told Mother, and the first time she'd almost killed him.

The elf straightened suddenly, rising, and angled his hand around Akiem's cock. The motion brought his mouth kissably close, and this time, Akiem took it, opened it, pushed his tongue in, needing more elf inside him than he cared to admit.

Nobody was here in this secret place above the city to deem it wrong. Nobody *cared* how two males sought pleasure in each other.

Red kissed him back, arching forward as his warm, expert hand worked Akiem's cock. Akiem gasped inside the kiss, but the elf didn't back off. An urgency sizzled through his moving body, and Akiem matched it. He clamped his hand against the elf's back, holding him close while the male's hand worked him toward the edge of insanity. To have a male's hand on him, a hand that wasn't his own, emptied Akiem's mind of everything but the good. The elf squeezed, and stroked, and teased. Then he tore free from the kiss, and his hand was gone, replaced by his hot, wet mouth and probing tongue.

Akiem plunged his hands into the elf's hair, holding him. He lifted his head and rolled his hips, angling deep into Red's accommodating mouth. He wrought pleasure from every inch. Gods, he was falling, falling so far into something that didn't make any sense, but it felt so damn right, felt freeing.

Pleasure crackled and sharpened to a fine point. He looked down himself at the elf with his cock in his mouth. Red's beautiful eyes locked on his. The contact struck a match, lit the touch paper, and blew every doubt out of Akiem's mind.

Ecstasy tore a tumble of growls from his lips, making the elf's tight mouth smile. It was more than he could take. Ecstasy snapped, and he came hard, teeth gritted as he rode the blinding wave and panted out his excess as the elf lifted off him. Red used a thumb to wipe his smiling mouth clean and then crawled up Akiem's body. He touched Akiem's face to make him look, then kissed him. He tasted of elf and seed, a new combination Akiem had never considered might arouse him. He wanted more.

The kiss filled with growls. Akiem shoved Red back against the pillar and plundered his mouth. Great gods, it wasn't enough. He dropped his

hand, tore at the elf's pants, and plunged a hand inside, taking all of him in hand. Red threw his head back, panting hard.

Akiem admired his rapturous face, slightly turned away. The straight nose and almost feminine jaw, and the tapered ear with its twinkling hoop earring.

Red caught him studying him and smiled coyly. "Who knew you liked elf in your diet?"

The comment struck too close. Akiem flinched, but Red grinned, like he knew exactly how it sounded but he'd said it anyway. He seemed the sort to say *anything*. The wink at the execution.... He was clearly a wild one. The center of attention. Impossible to chain. No wonder he charged for his time. He was worth every coin.

Red clutched the back of Akiem's neck. His smile fell away, and his eyes turned fierce. "Will you bend for me, dragon?"

Something inside tore free. Terror, maybe.

He couldn't.

Memories flashed.

Rough hands holding him down. Hot panting against the back of his neck where the elf's hand burned now. The feel of *male* forced inside. The growls, the pressure, the heat, and the hurt of it all.

Akiem recoiled, stumbling. Sudden, vicious sickness rolled through him.

"Wait..." The elf stepped forward. Horror paled his face, because he knew. Akiem had revealed too much. He'd revealed the worst of his wounds.

No, no... this had been a mistake. His knee hit the low wall—the only barrier between him and the long fall onto the street below. He could fall and end it now. There was peace in death, wasn't there? He'd thought so. He'd tried to find it once, but death had tossed him back.

"Dragon... it's all right..." Red approached, hunched, making himself smaller, less threatening, and offered a hand. "I won't hurt you."

Akiem tasted metal. It wasn't real. The male who haunted his dreams wasn't here. But it felt real. He could hear his thick, boiling laughter. *Submit for me, prince*. And Akiem had, because he'd had no other choice.

The elf looked at him, eyes full of pity.

"This was a mistake." What was he doing here, with an elf? He turned, facing the vast open space, and let the wind push and shove him.

“What’s your name?” the elf asked behind him. “Tell me your name and step back from the edge. We can go to my place—”

He couldn’t tell him. Names didn’t matter in transactions. “The Black Prince.”

He stepped off the edge. The shift took him long before the street could rush up and death could claim him. He flung open his wings and soared low over the rooftops, away from the elf and the terrible things Akiem had done.



AKIEM HAD A LOWER DRAW him a bath and take his clothes to the laundry. He smelled of elf and sex, evidence of his indiscretion.

He flung open his chamber window, allowing the wind to blast in, and then soaked in the bath by the open fire. Steam rolled in the chilled air, but the bath was warm. With his arms braced on the sides, he ran his gaze over his scars. They’d faded some. A few were only visible when the light caught them, but they’d never fully vanish. He remembered the weight behind every cut. Remembered the smell of hot metal and how it had laced his throat, filling him up. He’d kept his shirt half on during the encounter with Red. Red hadn’t seen his scars, but he’d witnessed Akiem’s horror at the thought of being... mounted.

Resting his head back, his eyes closed, and he drifted somewhere between wakefulness and sleep. The nightmares usually found him here, but they didn’t rush him. What he did find waiting for him in this warm, soft place was the elf’s wicked mouth and how he’d been able to summon hidden parts of Akiem to the surface. He began to harden, and his mind wandered. He recalled the elf’s soft mouth taking him in deep. Recalled spilling his seed into the elf’s mouth in mindless pleasure. Red was a whore. Sex was his profession. Akiem could see why. He was damn good at it.

“Where were you?”

Akiem opened his eyes. Decades of restraint hid his panic before the king could notice. “I walked the northern boundary,” he lied smoothly.

“Did you?” The king glittered in whites and golds. He approached the bath, rolling up his white bell sleeves. He loomed on Akiem’s left, glanced down into the water, and roamed his gaze over Akiem’s body. His gaze

snagged on Akiem's erection. His lips parted and fresh tension simmered a warning around him.

Akiem waited, keeping his face blank. If Luceran wanted more from him, he wasn't sure he could give it, not after what he'd experienced with Red. Whatever he had with Luceran, it wasn't anything like what he'd felt with the elf. The lust Luceran roused in him was dark, born of the king's control these past few months. Luceran spoke to that mindless part of Akiem, the part he tried to bury.

Luceran perched on the edge of the bath and crossed his wrists over his thigh. "Do you think me a fool?"

He knew exactly where Akiem had been.

Akiem locked his jaw. "No."

"I'm tired of lies. It's bad enough I hear them from my brother, but from you? Where did I fail you for you to betray me so?"

He moved to heave himself out the water. "I haven't—"

Luceran's hand found his throat and pushed Akiem down. Water rushed up his nose and down his throat. He gasped, swallowing more water. His lungs burned. His body bucked, trying to writhe free. He clawed at the hand holding him under, twisted and thrashed. The shift tried to tear through him.

Luceran let go.

Akiem thrust upward and spluttered up water. *Breathe*. It wasn't mud; it was just water. He clutched the edge of the bath, vision a blur, his past trying to drown him too. The bronze had held him down, forced him into the estuary mud, and the mud had pulled and sucked, wrapping him in coldness. He'd died then. Death was cold. So cold.

Shivers robbed him of his control, and he hissed through his teeth.

Luceran walked away. "Go to the elf again and I'll make you watch as Clarion takes his head."

The connecting door slammed behind him.

Akiem panted into the cold, empty room. There was no choice. He couldn't return to Red, even if he wanted to. Ever. The mercenary elf would leave the city, and Akiem would never see him again.

It was for the best.

A sob rolled up his throat. He swallowed it, and the others that followed, keeping any betrayal of emotion hidden inside.

CHAPTER 11



Zane

SOMEONE HAD HURT the Black Prince. The hurt had gone bone deep. When Zane had suggested he might want to be fucked and the dragon's eyes had widened before he could hide the response, Zane knew. Whatever he'd endured, it had scarred him inside. Zane's heart fucking ached for a dragon.

Alumn, he was doomed. Now the dockside killings made sense. Those beasts had been about to rape Zane, and the prince knew exactly how that felt.

Shit.

Had he known, he would have approached things differently.

Maybe Zane could save him too?

A crazy thought. A fool's thought. It had been a job, like any other.

"*Service me, elf.*" The way he'd demanded it... his tone, the strength behind it, the typical dragon assumption that all elves lived to serve. But, Alumn help him, Zane had *enjoyed* obeying.

It was just the game. He didn't truly care for him. He had a plan: seduce the dragon and get answers. He just had to get him talking.

Jevan would think him insane.

The next day passed too damn slowly. He spent the morning asking around for jobs, and when dusk came, Zane headed to the docks.

The dragon didn't come, but he would. He was starved for what Zane could give him. That much had been more than obvious. He'd come again. They always did.

He didn't come the next night either—or the next.

A week passed. Nothing.

Maybe they hadn't shared a connection, but he was sure he'd felt something between them, something intangible. Zane fucked around. It made life on the road tolerable; he'd dare say even fun. The kiss, and then having the dragon in his hand and mouth, watching him thaw and come undone. That had been real. The *Black Prince* had revealed his true self on that rooftop—his mask had fallen away—and by Alumn, he was so fucking beautiful. Zane wanted him to visit again, and unless Zane's instincts were way off, the dragon wanted it too.

So, why hadn't he come back? It couldn't just be the mistake he'd made in asking him to bend, could it?

What if something had happened to him?

What if Luceran knew?

Shit. All that was out of Zane's control.

Zane needed another plan to get to Jevan. The prince wasn't his concern. Couldn't be. He was dragon, for fuck's sake. Elves were his *prey*.

He collected his knives, threw on his hooded jacket, and went out into the night. Forget the dragon, the kiss, the rooftop blow that had left Zane so fucking wired he'd taken his own cock in hand the second the dragon had jumped off the roof and dealt with his pleasure, coming so damn hard he'd needed a pillar to hold himself up. Forget all that. There was another way around this.

Elder Killian's home wasn't guarded. It didn't need to be. He was the city elder, leader of the elected council. He stood for control and peace and maintained good relations with the dragons. Now Zane knew how he accomplished that peace, but it wouldn't be enough to tell others. He needed proof.

He chose a rear window, out of sight from the main thoroughfare, and after smashing a pane with his elbow, he reached in, flicked the lock, and let himself inside. The house was quiet. Killian would be asleep at this hour. He'd have household assistants, but if Zane played this right, they wouldn't wake. After a few false starts in bedrooms where others slept soundly, Zane found the elder's room. He plucked his daggers free and approached the

bed. The elder slept alone—of course he did—snoring lightly. The fact he killed elflings every month didn't appear to keep him awake at night.

Zane loomed over him. He could slit his throat and leave. He rarely desired to kill someone. Killian was the exception. But then nobody would know why the elder had been murdered in his bed, and the why was important.

Bracing an arm against the headboard, he leaned in close and pressed the edge of his blade against the male's throat. Killian's lashes fluttered. He opened his eyes.

"Remember me?"

Killian sucked in air through his nose.

"Make a noise and you'll be dead before help comes."

The male panted, eyes wide. He should be afraid. He deserved to feel fear, the same way those elflings felt when they smelled dragon and knew their fate.

"What possessed you to hand them over?" He had to know. No explanation could excuse it, but maybe there was a reason he couldn't see.

"They'll kill us all if I don't," the elder whispered.

Zane bared his teeth in a snarl. "They told you this?"

"That lord—the king's brother—he told me."

"It's bullshit. They won't kill us. They need us to keep the city working. Clarion's bluffing."

Killian swallowed. His throat moved against the knife's edge. "I can't take that risk."

Zane pushed in. "Yes, you fucking could. They're kids, you son of a dragon's cunt. You're supposed to protect them—and us."

"I am. By doing this! I have to."

Alumn, give him the strength to spare the sniveling coward. "When is the next trade?"

"Six days."

Six days until the next full moon. Six days before Killian handed another line of elves over to the dragons. He'd see an end to it and Clarion, and then he and Jevan would leave, hit the old roads down the coast. The dragons wouldn't find them if they kept to the hills, and this whole nightmare would be over.

Zane straightened. "You have coin?"

The elder nodded and reached for the bedside table. Zane got there first and found a money pouch with enough coin to see him until the end of the month.

“That’s mine...” Killian protested, sitting up in bed.

“Be grateful I’m not leaving you in a pool of your own blood.”

“You’re just a thief—a coward like the rest of us. What will you do, huh? Drink the coin away in that tavern and pretend you can make a difference? Look around you. We don’t fight them. We can’t. Some elves die so the rest of us can live. That’s how it is.”

Zane backed away from the bed before he stuck his dagger in Killian’s belly. He tucked the money pouch over his belt and stared back at the elder. “I’m nothing like you.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ll die like all the humans who stood up to them. Upset Luceran’s rule and it will be on your head, sellsword.”

“Do they kill them, the elves you deliver? Fuck them too?”

The elder flinched.

“You make me sick.” He didn’t even try to keep his voice low. “We had pride once. We were better than this, better than you. Maybe we can be again, but not if we let them take our young!”

“Those who think like you will die fighting them.”

“At least they won’t live to see you sell their children for some mockery of peace.”

Zane was done here. He left the room and met a household assistant in the hallway. She saw him, saw his knives, and screamed for help. He jogged down the stairs, passing others, and bolted out the door to the sound of an alarm whistle.

He couldn’t go back to the lodge, not while they might be hot on his tail, so he walked the city limits, keeping to the piles of rubble that sprouted weeds bigger than him and hid his passing from prying eyes. He knew he’d walked too far when a screech overhead sent him ducking into the tall grass. The dragon circling above blotted out much of the starlit sky whenever it swooped low. Alumn, the thing was huge. Its scales shimmered, each one touched by shimmering moonlight, making the beast’s whiteness *shine*.

Clarion or Luceran. Zane didn't know either well enough to distinguish them, but the dragon was definitely diamond. He watched the beast settle atop a flat-topped building. It spread its wings, giving them a settling few flaps before tucking them against its back. The crown—a ridge of bone that spread outward behind the skull, which all dragons had—fanned backward, each tip as sharp as a blade. Luceran was said to be beyond vicious and Clarion brutal, but the king's crown of blades was well known. This was Luceran. He shifted, warping the air around him, pulling it in, flipping it over, and with a blinding flash, all of that dragon was contained in the body of a man. He opened the roof access door and disappeared inside.

Zane scanned the torchlit adjacent buildings. This was the compound. He crouched outside its wire- and metal-stakes boundary, but he'd seen enough to know where the king resided, and likely where the Black Prince did too.

He knew how to get inside and how to get to him.

He wet his lips. Six days until the full moon. He couldn't do this alone. Years ago, he should have died in a battle defending a dream that had been doomed anyway. Elves weren't strong enough to fight dragons—alone. What if they had a dragon among their number?

He wrapped his fingers around the locket in his pocket. Hundreds of thousands had died, Jevan's love among them, whoever they had been. An entire species wiped out because they'd fought back. Humans had been brave. They'd had honor. They hadn't given up, even when it was over. They'd fought, never surrendering, while elves had fled.

Jevan had saved him from the mud that day during the battle, and Zane had tried to understand why he'd lived, while thousands upon thousands hadn't. He'd demanded answers of the ever-silent Alumn, but with none in sight, he'd fallen into wandering, fallen into anything and anyone so he might feel again.

What if this was the reason he'd lived? What if that reason had brought him here in time to find an obsidian-scaled prince?

He had to get inside that compound.

Tonight.

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CHAPTER 12



Akiem

LUCERAN WATCHED him at all times. During breakfast, Akiem sat beside the king. Dinner too, when the king was in residence and not patrolling his borders. Luceran hadn't spoken more than a few words, and those were to order Akiem where to sit, what to eat, and when to retire. The king's fury was all the more deadly when silent. He'd snap, and soon. Akiem knew of only one way to subdue wrath, and that was to give the king what he wanted and reveal the mystery of himself, along with other truths. Whether he mentally and physically could was another matter. If he didn't, he'd feel the edge of the king's axe.

He mulled this over while walking the warren-like compound hallways, passing dragons he recognized from court. Few spoke to him. Scorn burned in their gazes. Leaving Luceran wasn't an option. His wings were too weak, too scarred for distant flight. A dragon as weakened as he was wouldn't survive long outside the king's guardianship.

It hadn't always been that way.

"Akiem," Clarion purred, catching up with him in a corridor. His boots clipped the stone floors, striking like a hammer punching in nails. "The Black Prince." He gave a sweeping, mocking bow and grinned on rising. "After he fucks you, you'll be a dead prince. How does that make you feel?"

Clarion wasn't wrong, and Akiem might have continued on without acknowledging him had he not been curious as to why the lord had tracked him through the compound.

"You already know that, though," Clarion acknowledged, striding close. Where Luceran's violet eyes sparkled, Clarion's were deeper in color, as though they sought to pull their observers in and smother them instead of merely bespelling them. "You've held out longer than the others. How long do you think you can keep the king dangling on the end of your tail before he bites it off?"

"What do you want, Clarion?" Omitting his title had the lord's lips twitching.

"You have me curious," the lord mused. "The king sent me to find you, but it seems to me you might appreciate a longer route back to his bed, no?"

Akiem didn't relish the thought of sitting silently beside the king while he sizzled in his anger. He had no wish to return to that painful scrutiny. He bowed his head in agreement.

"Come," Clarion urged, quickening his pace. "It's time you and I got to know each other."

Akiem fell into step beside the lord. They passed through maze-like sections and traveled down flights of stairs, descending below street level. The air cooled and dampened. Even the flickering torches struggled to burn off the moisture.

"The king and I... It's not what you think." Akiem wasn't sure why he'd said it, perhaps to cover his own hide. "We're not... together like that."

Clarion laughed. "I'm sure his last toy thought the same."

Lowers dipped their heads as they approached and averted their eyes. How long until word got back to Luceran that Akiem was walking the halls with his brother? He wondered if Luceran had indeed sent his brother here. Luceran had mentioned his brother's lies, right before plunging Akiem under water.

Clarion stopped outside a thick, windowless door at the end of a windowless corridor. "How would you like"—he opened the door, unveiling the sight inside—"a distraction?"

The smell of wet metal hit Akiem first, then elven blood. His nostrils flared and guts churned, memories clawing at him. Clarion swept ahead into the room, straight to the female elf pooled on the floor. Thick ropes, looped around her wrists, tied her to metal loops in the floor.

The singer from the feast.

Others were here too. A pair of elflings, twins, huddled together in the corner. These were Clarion's *pets*.

Sickness burned at the back of Akiem's throat. None of this should have surprised him, and he wasn't supposed to care. For the longest time, he hadn't cared. Hadn't he also chained elves to dungeon walls, beating answers out of them for his now-dead queen and mother? Gods, that life and those memories didn't seem like they belonged to him, not anymore.

"This one..." Clarion caught the singer's chin and yanked her head up. Tears stained her cheeks and crusted her swollen eyes. "...sang like a bird every year at the feast. But this year..." He sighed. "This year she decided she had grown bored of my company. So I cut out her tongue." He discarded her and turned to the twins. The pair shied away, clutching each other. Clarion grabbed their leashes and pulled, toppling them forward onto their hands and knees. Two females. It had been difficult to tell before, but now Akiem saw the curves of their hips and slimmer shoulders. "These two are delightfully feisty, but they still take dragon cock. Most of it." The lord threw a grin back at Akiem, expecting his approval.

Akiem looked on, outwardly bored. Behind his back, his fingers curled into fists.

"Ah, but wait, there's one more." He threw the twins down, flung open another door, and beckoned Akiem inside the dark, damp room. The windowless room opened like a cave mouth and smelled of decay and shit, just like the room Mother had locked Akiem inside.

His heart lurched like a rabbit in a snare. Briefly, his blood pumped too loudly, drowning out the sound of whimpering elves. If he didn't get a grip, Clarion would see the weakness on his face. Clarion looked at the dark-skinned elf chained to the wall. He didn't see the pieces of Akiem's mask crumbling away.

"This fucking one." The lord stopped in front of the elf and looked down.

Akiem had been in a position like this before, with a stubborn elf chained to the wall. This one was just as fierce looking. On his knees, he pulled on his chains, arms straining. He hadn't been here long. Soon, the lack of light would eat away at his strength. For now, he was full of hate and disgust. Recognition tugged on his memories, but before he could place the male, Clarion flung a look over his shoulder.

“He’s not to be touched, so he watches through the door. I think he likes it.”

The elf spat at Clarion’s feet, missing by miles. The lord laughed it off and turned. “So, which will it be?”

Akiem blinked. “Which what?”

The twins’ sobbing chipped at his broken mind.

“Fuck them, cut them, do as you like. They’re elves. They’re ours. You look like you could do with a release. Call it a gift and when you’re done, perhaps you and I can talk some more?”

This was the one time Akiem’s preference might save him. “I prefer males.”

Clarion sighed and looked again at the black elf staring through him. “Well, then, maybe it’s time this one joined in instead of observed? What do you think?”

“Fuck. You,” the elf snarled, baring tiny canine teeth. “Come near me and I’ll bite your fucking cocks off, you yellow-bellied overgrown lizards.”

Clarion’s smile grew. “He’ll be a delight to break.”

Akiem wet his lips, his mouth dry. He’d known this happened. Dragons picking up elves at the docks was just the start. Most ended up in rooms like this one. He hadn’t *seen* it or needed to think on it, but now here it was, thrust in his face like the meat he’d mistakenly eaten at the feast. He ground his teeth.

“Me...” Clarion returned through the door to the twins. “I prefer them fresh and young.” He said it loud and clear, without shame. “Some before they’ve had their first monthly bleed. Have you ever fucked your prey and then eaten it, Akiem?”

Akiem swallowed bile. “I don’t believe I have.”

The elven girls buried their heads against each other and sobbed.

Clarion eyed them, teeth bared, body bulked out as he towered over their prone forms. The sight was exactly how they did things this side of the ocean. Elves were bullied, abused, and treated like nothing, and after all that, they were killed for sport. Amethyst—his brood—as brutal as they were, hadn’t tortured elves for fun—besides Mother, who’d tortured everyone and everything for pleasure. It had been war. This was... abhorrent.

His mouth twitched. A growl rumbled from his depths. He swallowed it down. “If Luceran smells elf on me, he’ll have my head.” His voice came

out rough, broken into pieces and ground down to dust. It sounded like lust, not the rage it was.

Clarion turned, eyes sparkling. “Shame. Perhaps the king won’t be around much longer to pull your leash, *Prince?*” He waved a hand. “Though, of course, I would know little of such things.”

Shock at the brazen treasonous words had Akiem too stunned to think of a response. He dipped his chin. “If you’ll excuse me, I must return to my chamber and await the king.”

“Another time, perhaps?” Clarion nodded toward the black elf seething in the dark.

“Another time.” Akiem strode from the room and closed the door on the sound of the girls’ whimpering becoming more urgent.



THE MADNESS CRAWLED under his skin again. He walked, not seeing the path ahead. Walked and walked and walked because he couldn’t fly and he couldn’t run. Walking was all he had.

They were just elves.

Just fucking elves.

None of this should matter to him.

He was Akiem, dragon prince to a dead court and the Black Prince with a heart of darkness. Untouchable. Immovable. He’d commanded flights. He’d ruled, briefly, until the metals had torn him down. He had been the pinnacle of dragonkin. He did not *care* for elves.

Fucking elves. Why was it always the fucking elves who ruined everything!

He tore into his chamber, slammed the door, fell back against it, and thrust his hands into his hair to squeeze out the thoughts. No, he didn’t care. No, it didn’t mean anything to him. The prick had cut out the singer’s tongue. So? He’d done worse for years. She was just one of many. It went on everywhere here. It was life here. The elves lived with it, so why couldn’t Akiem?

Someone cleared their throat.

Akiem snapped his eyes open.

An elf stood at his window, backlit by the waxing moon. An elf was in his chamber, inside the king's compound. Not just any elf. His Red.

Akiem blinked. Still there.

"Hello, lover."

No. Impossible. Insane.

He shoved from the door and made it to the end of the bed in three strides. The elf lifted his chin, defiant and prepared. He had his knives but hadn't reached for them.

"You..." Akiem's voice cracked. "You can't be here."

Red approached, hands out placatingly. "Look, okay... this is an intrusion, I understand that. And what happened on the rooftop... I didn't mean—"

"Stop."

Red stopped. His green eyes shone, open, expectant, waiting.

He couldn't damn well be here. Akiem's heart thumped too hard, thundering over his racing thoughts. He pointed at the closed connecting door and whispered, "That door leads into the king's chamber."

Red looked at the door, frowned, and then looked back at Akiem. "Someone has separation issues," he whispered back.

No. No! Akiem growled a warning. "You must leave. Now."

Luceran could be next door. He might be listening to every word. He'd kill Red or let Clarion have him for his menagerie of elves, which would be far, far worse.

Akiem broke his locked stance and closed the distance between them. He grabbed Red's jacket and yanked him toward the window. "Get out."

Red resisted, tugging back and digging his heels in, but his strength could never match Akiem's.

Akiem shoved him at the open window. "Get out!"

Red fell against the glass and clutched the sill, but he still wouldn't leave.

Akiem would shove him out if it came to it. He towered over him and sneered, adding more dragon to his next words. "*Get the fuck out. You're not welcome here.*"

Red flinched. It stabbed Akiem in the heart, but by the gods, he wasn't backing down. Of everything he'd found in this new land, Red was the only damn thing that had given him a moment's respite from the madness, that

had made him *feel* again. If Red didn't leave, he'd die like the rest of his kin, and Akiem couldn't—wouldn't let that happen.

"I need your help," Red said, eyes pleading.

"I don't care." He grabbed the elf by the throat. Red's racing pulse fluttered against the pad of Akiem's thumb, so fucking fragile. "I'm not what you think," he whispered.

"I know. That's why I'm here." The words, the way his mouth shaped them, and the tiny tremors running through his body, threatened to undo Akiem.

"No. Gods, no." His grip eased, and with it came the realization that he had the elf pinned awkwardly against the window frame. He snatched his hand back. Redness blushed across the elf's neck. Akiem had hurt him. He knew what it felt like to have hands around his throat. "I can't help you." He wet his lips. His fingers roamed up the elf's jaw and skimmed his cheek, his ear, like his body had its own wants and wasn't listening to the horror his mind screamed. "I can't..."

Who was he telling? Himself or the elf?

Red caught his wrist and gently lowered it between them. "I know somewhere we can go. Will you just listen?"

"There is nowhere."

"There is. Come with me." He slipped his hand into Akiem's.

"I can't." Akiem braced his free hand on the window frame, holding himself back. Gods, he wanted to flee with this elf, to run away from these halls, from these dragons, from their ways and his past.

Stupid thoughts from a stupid mind, his mother had said time and time again.

"Luceran won't know. Trust me."

Trust him? Akiem trusted no one, least of all himself and certainly not a whore of an elf.

Red ducked out the window and was gone in a blink. Akiem should have closed the window and left it at that. Their forbidden tryst wasn't worth the risk. It couldn't last. It shouldn't last. It was folly, misadventure, nonsense. He just wanted more coin.

Akiem leaned from the window and saw the elf three stories below, looking up. His mouth lifted in a smirk that hooked into Akiem's heart. By the great gods, how had this elf ensnared him so?

He swore, clambered through the window, and dropped, landing in a crouch beside the elf. Straightening, he sighed hard, resigned to whatever happened next. The elf nodded and waved him into a sprint through the shadows, keeping close to the buildings to avoid the pools of light beneath the scattered torches.

Akiem followed him into an outer section of buildings, mostly unlit and unattended, through narrow, half-crumbled halls, and then into a dark bedchamber. Red pulled the thick drapes across the window and lit a single oil lamp, using matches from a drawer. He appeared to know his way around the room remarkably well.

Akiem turned the lock over on the door, drawing Red's gaze. He nodded, carried the lamp to the fireplace mantle, and placed it in front of a mirror to illuminate the room.

Akiem sniffed the air. A mingling of scents lingered, mostly elf and dragon. They were still inside the compound, yet the scent of elf was strong here. "How do you know this place?"

"Don't ask."

Red stood by the cold fireplace, his eyes serious as he watched Akiem wander the room, assessing the made bed and empty cabinets. Someone used the space, but they hadn't been here recently. He pulled open a bedside drawer and eyed the thin bottle of massage oil, then the bed, and then Red, his eyebrow arched. So, that was what this room was for: sexual encounters. Red knew of it because he came here regularly. Akiem should have expected it, but jealousy squirmed inside his gut at the thought that *his* Red had been here with others. "It is a wonder you have lived as long as you have."

"Skill," Red said like he believed it.

"Luck, more likely."

"Alumn watches over me."

"You should not have come." With the room assessed as safe, Akiem rounded on Red, stopping beyond his reach but close enough to make his point clear. "You should have left the city. What possessed you to break into the compound again? Are you a fool? Do you wish to die? Because that is how this ends for you. Luceran knows about you. He will kill you."

Red's eyes widened. "I am no fool, *dragon*, and I have good reason to come to you."

“Sex? Is that why you brought me here, into a room you know? Am I another conquest? Some dragon fancy to warm your bed? I’ll not pay another coin, so if you came for that, you can leave.” He didn’t want to believe that others regularly used Red, didn’t want to let his trade get beneath his skin, but as Red turned his face away, the truth was obvious. The elf was more than familiar with dragons. He’d asked him in the bar what his profession was, and he’d told him mercenary, among other things. He took coin from dragons for sex. That’s why he’d been at the docks and why he was here now. It was his *only* reason for being here. The rooftop encounter had been... eye-opening. Though it meant more to Akiem than he’d ever let this whore know, he couldn’t do the same again. It already hurt, and it would only hurt more if he fell for this clever elf’s sexual wiles.

“You need to leave here and never return. Leave the city, find another place to sell your *talents*, elf, before Luceran catches up with you.” *Before I tell him what you are.*

Gods, why did it hurt so?

“I can’t.”

“You need my help?” Akiem laughed dryly. “Fine. What do you need me for?”

“Clarion has kidnapped a friend of mine. I have to free him.”

Akiem backed up, needing distance from Red, from this room. He knew the elf he spoke of. The elf had stood beside Red at the execution. He saw the connection now. It was all falling into place. Coincidence hadn’t brought them together. Red sought to use him. “I can’t help you.”

“I just need to know where he is. That’s all.”

Akiem leaned against the bedpost, needing the support. It wasn’t just about the room, the bed, and the coin. “You meant to seduce me to discover this information?”

Red swallowed. “Initially, yes, but—”

Akiem made for the door. What a damn fool he was. He’d wanted company so badly he’d followed an elf and paid him to *do things*.

Why was he so surprised? He’d been used his whole life, and now here too, by a worthless elf. Always someone’s bitch. Always someone’s toy. As a son, a prince, a pet. A fucking tool.

“Wait—”

Akiem whirled, batted Red’s reaching hand away, and snarled, “Don’t touch me, elf!”

Red lunged and pushed his arm under Akiem's neck. His back hit the wall. Pressure crushed his throat. The fear came hot and fast, drenching body and mind. He gasped, tasted metal, and stopped. Everything stopped. *Lie still. Let it happen.* It would be over faster that way.

Red sprang back, shock blanching his face. "Shit, I'm sorry. I just... I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm... It's just, I need your help. You're the only chance..." He stood still, breathing hard, watching Akiem's face, reading all the signs. *Seeing fear. Knowing.*

Akiem closed his eyes, squeezing out cold, useless tears. He waited for the panic to subside, for his body to thaw and become his own again. Lying still, turning cold, had been his safe place for so long that he couldn't stop it from happening. It made him *prey*. The same assault on his senses that always happened shuddered through him, his body rebelling against his mind or vice versa. Minutes passed, and eventually, the panic subsided enough to explain.

"He was dragon," Akiem said, eyes still closed. The past brushed up against him, making his skin burn and itch. "Metal. One of the first great metals who broke from the ice and changed the world forever. He was a monster." He grimaced, tasting the bronze chief inside him all over again. "The bronze dragonkin will mount anything that moves. Dokul was... the worst of them." His mouth pulled into a mockery of a smile. He opened his eyes and found Red sitting on the edge of the bed, face stricken. "He kept me. He..." Akiem's throat clogged. He cleared it with a low growl. "He fucked me, as man and dragon. Repeatedly. For weeks. Forever." It was the first time he'd said the words out loud. It didn't hurt as much as he'd expected. In fact, telling his truth this elf eased some of the aching guilt he'd carried for so long.

"Why?" Red rasped.

"*Why* is the easiest question to answer: because he was dragon, because he was bronze, because he could." He tapped his head where the agony still lived. "I deserved it, but... things came to a head. We fought. He killed me. At least, I think he did. I was never going to beat him. He drowned me in the estuary mud. I can still taste it sometimes, in my dreams..."

Pain and pity crossed the elf's face, like he understood more than he should. Akiem could never voice these truths to anyone else, but he didn't fear this elf would use the truth against him.

“But I survived. I don’t know how or why. I crawled from the mud as dragon and fled. Flew to the ends of the Earth. I didn’t think. I just needed to chase the horizon until the world ended or I did. That’s how Luceran found me.”

Sadness replaced the pity on Red’s face. “Nobody deserves that.”

Akiem laughed. “You do not know me, elf.”

“I’m so sorry, for all of it. I never meant to hurt you.” He almost seemed sincere, this elf who kept throwing himself at dragons for coin.

“I cannot help you. You’re elf and I’m dragon, and that’s how things are.” Akiem couldn’t stomach the pity in his eyes and the compassion he didn’t deserve. “Now leave. Our business is done.”

“He’s taking our young.” Red stood, breathed deeply, and approached slowly, as though he were approaching a skittish wild animal. “Every full moon, Clarion accepts a trade from our elder in exchange for peace. It’s bullshit. I have to stop it.”

The sight of the young elves huddled close in Clarion’s chambers attempted to undermine Akiem’s determination to forget any of this had happened. He’d tasted elf flesh during the feast and listened to an elf’s final song before Clarion cut out her tongue. Whatever he thought of Red, those elves didn’t deserve such a fate.

“I discovered the trade and threatened Clarion,” Red went on, gaining confidence now that Akiem hadn’t shut him down. “He took Jevan to guarantee my silence and had me beaten. Help me find Jev. Help me stop the trades.”

“This friend of yours, his skin is black, like my scales?”

Red stepped closer again, but Akiem tensed and the elf backed off, raising his hands. He frowned, his mouth pinched tight. “Yes. You’ve seen him?”

“I know where he is.” Red’s breathing stuttered in relief, but that relief was short-lived as Akiem continued. “He’s unharmed for now, but if you try to get to him, you’ll die. He’s deep within the compound in a room Clarion has guarded night and day.”

“Shit.” Red started pacing. “There must be a way. Windows?”

“None.”

“Clarion can’t always be there?”

“You won’t get inside.” Akiem watched him walk and listened to his boots strike the boards. This elf had repeatedly risked his life to save his

friend. They had a special relationship. “Your friend... is he your lover?”

Red laughed dismissively. “No. It’s not like that, though I did try it on with him once. He threatened to cut my balls off.” The elf’s smile returned, albeit briefly. “He saved my life. I owe him the same.”

Akiem wiped the drying tears from his face. He’d failed most of his life, beneath one ruler or another, but in this one thing—saving one elf—perhaps he could do some good? He’d pay for it, either with his body, or mind, or with his life. But what else was there? He was under no illusions. He’d die here eventually, likely beneath Clarion’s axe. His death should stand for something, and if that something was the life of an elf, it seemed fitting. Mother would have raged at him, despised him more, shut him away for weeks, alone in the dark. That thought decided it for him. He’d save an elf to spite her. To spite them all.

“I can get to him.”

Red’s pacing ceased. He looked up. “You’ll help me?”

“Not for you. For him. I know what it is to be chained by dragons.” Akiem unlocked the door, stepped outside, and paused. He didn’t want to look back. Looking back would imply he cared, and the elf did not care for him in return. “Be here tomorrow night.”

“Wait—”

He hesitated.

“My name is Zane.”

“I do not care to know your name, *elf*.” He closed the door and retraced their steps, opting for the door to his chamber instead of the window. A breeze had swept through his room, wiping away any scent of elf. He closed the window and locked the latch. If Red tried to reach him again, he’d find his way barred. That was the only way. His brief encounter with the elf was just that. Now he had to turn his mind to the king, to Clarion, and what he could do for a single elf who didn’t deserve to die beneath dragons.

CHAPTER 13



Akiem

THE DIAMOND DRAGON flew in hot, claws out, wings clutched close. At the last second, he flung them out and parachuted perfectly into the abandoned tower's gaping mouth. Akiem waited at the back of the huge room, as man, not dragon. Clarion hadn't yet seen him as dragon. Only Luceran had seen his scars. He intended to keep it that way.

The diamond—Clarion—shook his head and narrowed his dark violet eyes on him. The effect was meant to make Akiem feel small, insignificant, and easily crushed, and it would have worked on a lesser dragon, but Akiem merely waited for the lord to finish preening and said, "I've reconsidered." He had to raise his voice to be heard over the dragon's bellows-like breathing.

Clarion snarled, lips rippling over rows of sharp teeth. Unlike Luceran, his skull didn't carry a crown of lance-like bone protrusions. His spikes were fewer and blunt. There was no denying he was a magnificent beast, with pearly white scales, claws of black obsidian, and an envious wingspan.

Clarion shifted with a magical scattering of light, and ear-popping pressure forced Akiem to look away. The king's brother approached, shrugging his plain cotton shirt and tan leather pants into alignment. He tilted his head, popping muscles in his neck, and then flashed Akiem a grin. "The black elf?"

“I want him.”

The male’s eyebrows lifted. “Figured you might.” He waved a hand. “Walk with me.”

Akiem obliged. This part of the compound belonged to Clarion. The lord slept with his own brood in his own area, within Luceran’s territory. He and the king rarely crossed paths. It seemed they avoided each other deliberately, perhaps for the sake of Luceran’s stable rule.

“You know my brother will kill you when he’s done with you, of that there’s no doubt,” Clarion said.

It was no secret. While Clarion sated his urges with elves, Luceran did the same with lower dragons—the same lowers who delighted in telling Akiem how he’d soon experience the king’s wrath.

“It’s why I’ve yet to submit.” Among other reasons.

They walked some more, Clarion’s grin growing with each step. “If you think to outmaneuver him, don’t. He’s already two steps ahead.” Interesting words, as though this were all an elaborate dance. “What if there was another way?”

It needed no explanation. Clarion had his eye on the throne. He was recruiting dragons to his cause. How much of a force did he already have? Enough to overthrow Luceran? There was a time, not so long ago, when Akiem might have warned the king. With Red’s—*Zane’s* betrayal, he’d considered the same again. But his feelings for Zane, even though they weren’t reciprocated, had shown him the truth of his twisted attraction to Luceran. He’d find no sanctuary in the king’s arms.

“I could use a warrior like you,” Clarion went on. “You have it in you. No other fucker could cross that ocean and live. You fought metals and survived. You have that look about you, Akiem. You’re a killer. Luceran ignores your potential because you fascinate him. He’s been at the top so long he’s forgotten the fight to get there. I’m sure you’ve noticed how I’m different...”

Different, indeed. He liked to torture elves. Akiem knew who and what Clarion was: a typical jeweled dragon. No mystery. No pretense. He took, and he owned, because he could.

“Have the elf,” Clarion said. “I’ll cover for you. I’ll get more for you. They’re easy to obtain. Young, old, black, pink—whatever you fancy. But you will do one thing for me.”

“Name it.”

Clarion stopped, forcing Akiem to stop as well. They were alone in a tunnel-like hallway, heading down toward Clarion's chambers. "Luceran's peace will not hold forever. When I need you, you'll stand beside me, and you won't even have to fuck me to do it."

His eyes were cold, colder than Luceran's. Akiem was no safer beside one brother than the other. At least with Luceran, he saw the killing blow coming. Clarion schemed too, and this was surely part of it, but it didn't matter. Akiem didn't fear death. In many ways, he welcomed it.

"Very well."

"Good." Clarion gripped Akiem's shoulder. His fingers dug in, and when he leaned closer, his violet eyes darkened to amethyst. "Now let's get you some elf."



JEVAN, Zane had called him. He looked up when Akiem and Clarion entered the torture chamber and stared straight into Akiem's gaze. If looks could kill, that one would be surrounded by dragon carcasses. A good thing elves weren't as strong as dragons, a fact made perfectly clear when Clarion detached the elf's ropes from the floor loops and pulled him to his feet. He had plenty of fight left in him, but he was wise enough to preserve his strength for when he'd need it most.

"Do you have somewhere you can take him?" Clarion asked.

"I do."

The lord reeled Jevan in. The elf hissed, setting off Clarion's laughter again. "Are you sure you can handle him? It'll be my ass Luceran comes for if his new toy hurts himself."

"I wouldn't be dragon if I couldn't." He took the loop of rope.

The elf spat. Wetness dashed Akiem's cheek and cooled as it dribbled down his chin. Clarion raised his hand in what would have been a devastating blow, but Akiem flung the length of rope around Jevan's neck and yanked, lynching him tight. His eyes watered and bulged, but still the stubborn elf stared back. This one had fight and spirit, and he'd see Akiem dead at his first opportunity.

Akiem held the loop tight until the elf's struggles slowed, then quickly loosened it to a torrent of splutters and gasps. "Do as I say and that need not

happen again.”

The elf hung his head, too focused on breathing to fight back.

Akiem led him stumbling along through the chamber that held Clarion’s other pets. They turned their heads away, trying to look small.

“Just... don’t kill him, Akiem. I need that one alive,” Clarion said, his focus falling on the twins.

“Why?”

“Only until the full moon. After that, he’s all yours.” The lord waved, shooing him on.

“What happens at the full moon?”

“The red-headed devil friend of his dies.” Clarion’s attention drifted onward, to the silent singer glaring his way. “Nothing you need concern yourself with.”

Jevan yanked on the rope, lunging for Clarion. Akiem almost didn’t catch him. He hauled the elf back under his control and looped an arm around his neck. The fool bucked, his head striking Akiem’s chin.

“*Stop,*” Akiem hissed in his ear, too low for Clarion to hear. “*Stop fighting me and you and Zane will survive this.*”

The elf froze at the sound of Zane’s name.

Clarion’s hideous laughter bubbled. “Keep him tied, Akiem. Lose him and it’ll be your head rolling. Understood?”

“Perfectly.”

They made it out of the torture chamber without further incident. Akiem’s words had calmed the elf, but it wouldn’t last. He hurried him along, veering into the emptier parts of the compound. It didn’t matter if anyone saw him. All of this would be over within a few hours, and then Akiem would deal with the consequences of having lost an elf under Clarion’s care.

The bedchamber was as he’d left it, although Zane had yet to arrive.

“I’m not fucking you. I don’t fuck dragons. And if I did, I wouldn’t touch the king’s leftovers.”

“You’d do well to keep your mouth shut.” Akiem tied the end of the rope to the bedpost. Jevan could work it loose given enough time, but the binds only needed to last until Zane arrived. “Zane is coming for you.”

“What?”

“You heard.” Akiem collected the oil lamp, found the matches, and lit the wick, just as Zane had done the night before. He could still smell the

fresh-cut-wood smell of elf, as if Zane had left moments ago, not hours. The bed drew his eye again, his mind seeing Zane servicing other dragons between the sheets. He'd never thought of himself as the jealous type. He'd coveted his broodbrother's freedom and the attention Mother paid him, but nothing else. Strange that he should feel it now, over a promiscuous elf.

"Then you aren't... you're not going to..." Jevan gestured at the bed, as much as his tied hands would allow.

"I have no interest in you."

An ache pounded behind his eyes. He rested his elbow on the fireplace mantle and rubbed his temples. Everything would be so much simpler if he didn't care. But how to go back to that? Now that he genuinely cared, he couldn't get the damn elf out of his head.

"Is this... Are you screwing with me?" Jevan queried. "Is Zane really coming, or is this some sick dragon trick?"

"If I wanted to screw with you, I'd set you free and chase you down. Now sit there, shut up, and be grateful you have a friend who cares."

The elf blessedly fell silent, but it didn't last.

"How do you even know Zane?" he asked. He was sitting on the edge of the bed now, arms still tied to the post. Some of his fight had fled. "How did you and he... How does that happen?"

Akiem opted for silence. *I paid him for sex* wasn't something he wanted to reveal to anyone.

"What about the others?"

Akiem tipped his head back and closed his eyes. Maybe he could just leave the elf tied to the bed and return to Luceran, but then he'd miss Zane. He'd miss the damn elf who took coin and didn't give a shit about Akiem's *feelings*, confused as they were. Gods, what was he doing?

"The girls, Helana and Teone? And..." The elf swallowed hard. "You can't leave them there with that monster. They'll die."

Akiem leveled his glare on the elf. "That's the part I meant when I said to be grateful you have a friend who cares. You get to live. They do not."

The elf's face pinched in disgust. "Why are you doing this?"

"It doesn't matter." The ache thudded heavily, beating in time with his heart. He pushed from the fireplace and found a chair to sink into. This room smelled like elf and sex, and it reminded him of a time on a rooftop with Zane on his knees. To his shame, he'd pay Zane again to relive that moment.

Ropes scraped, and the bed creaked. Akiem looked up to find the elf trying to loosen the knots. “You can’t run.”

“I’m not leaving without them.” He tugged at his ropes.

Zane’s friend was testing Akiem’s patience. “Without who?”

“Helana. Teone. I’m going back to get them.”

Elves. They’d become the bane of his life. “No, you’re not.”

Jevan stared at Akiem. “That sick monster holds them down and fucks them both. He finishes in one while the other watches and makes her pleasure him until he’s hard again. Then he takes them wherever he can—mouth, ass, doesn’t matter. They’re just pieces of meat to him, and I won’t fucking leave them there!”

Akiem fell forward and dug his elbows into his knees. He laced his hands behind his head, needing to squeeze out the memories the elf’s words had summoned. The pressure of such invasions had been worse than the pain. The feel of *another* violating him... Sickness flushed his skin hot and cold. For the first time since crossing the ocean, the marks on his arms tingled, his fingers itching to find a blade and add to their number.

“They’re too afraid to open their mouths to scream. You have no idea what they endure. You don’t even care! I don’t know why you’re doing this, but if you leave them there, you’re worse than he is, because you could do something, but you won’t!”

He had the chair in his hands, saw the wall, saw the chair shatter against the wall, and still he didn’t register he’d moved until his heart slowed.

He tossed the bits of chair at the fireplace, not caring that most missed. It wasn’t enough. He wanted to crush the memories out of himself. Needed to crush something before his veins exploded and the shift rolled through him. The dresser toppled beneath his hands, smashing apart, and still it wasn’t enough. He was breaking apart. It was more than he could take. Oh, he knew what it felt like to be afraid to scream. He knew what it felt like to be forced to open for a dragon and weep silent tears in the dark.

He had the elf in his hands, his throat so delicate. The whites of his eyes showed. Fear, he reeked of it.

A twitch and he’d be dead. Maybe that would work to Akiem’s advantage. He’d toss the carcass at Clarion’s feet and tell the lord he followed no orders save his own. He’d tell Luceran how his own broodbrother plotted against him, and maybe Akiem would wield the axe *for* the king, as another executioner, another guardian, but for a king this

time, not a queen. He was fucking Prince Akiem of the amethyst brood, and the world needed to remember he'd been bred to rule.

"I've killed hundreds of your kind." He forced the words through gritted teeth and smelled the rich spiciness of fear on the elf. The dragon in him rolled in the scent. "Shredded them, placed their heads on pikes, eaten them alive. Don't think I won't do the same to you."

"You're just like them." Hatred dripped from every word.

Akiem blinked.

No, this was what he didn't want. This was what he was trying *not* to be. He flung himself away, found a corner, and wedged himself in, eyeing the door and waiting for Zane to come and take his friend away.

Gods. He looked at his hands. Killer's hands. There was a rot at his core he could never escape from.

At least the elf had stopped trying to free himself. He'd stopped talking too.

Zane pushed open the door some time later and toed through the broken bits of furniture to reach Jevan. He glanced over, checking on Akiem, and neatly cut Jevan's ropes with a dagger. They embraced.

Akiem looked away. What must it be like to care for someone so deeply you'd go against the worst of monsters to free them?

"Thank you," Zane said, drawing Akiem's gaze back to the pair. Zane seemed sad and wary, and that was a crime. He had a face made for laughter and delight, not sadness.

"Clarion will be waiting for you at the next trade," Akiem growled. More dragon sounded in his voice than he'd expected, the words rough-edged and uneven. "Leave the city. You can do no more here."

Zane's brow pinched. "Some things you can't run from."

Oh, Akiem knew all about running in circles. Even now he didn't know if he wanted to help these elves or kill them. He didn't know if what he felt for Zane was more than lust, because his mind wasn't capable of more. If he genuinely cared, he'd do more, wouldn't he? Just like Jevan had said. Half of him wanted to rage at the world, but the other half just wanted to be held. He heard Mother's voice: *stupid thoughts from a stupid mind*.

Jevan rubbed his neck, where fresh bruises bloomed. The movement snagged Akiem's wandering mind. *Prey*. The elf winced and swallowed, then became aware of Akiem watching him. "Clarion said you'd die if you lost me."

Zane swung a questioning glare at his friend, almost as though he cared, but then he turned away, casting his gaze at the ceiling. Now that the trade was done he couldn't meet Akiem's eyes. Their business was over.

"I've died before, elf." Dragon rippled beneath his skin, rising to the surface. He was losing control. "Leave."

Zane took in the mess and opened his mouth to speak. This time Akiem did growl, cutting him off. "Go!" The shift stretched his mental chains, stretching, yawning.

They left, and just in time. The shift had him, turning him over, remaking him. He breathed out, spilling dragon into the small room and filling it up until the walls groaned and cracked, then finally burst apart. Akiem flung his wings out, shaking off dust and rubble. He lifted his head, climbed from the ruined house, and opened his jaws, stoking the fire low in his throat. He tasted elf in the air, and that would not do. Throwing his head high, he freed the fire, lighting the sky with purple flame.

Another cry sliced through the night.

Luceran. He'd known... somehow... and now he was here.

The king banked in the dark sky, presenting arched wings like a crescent moon.

Akiem lowered his head, laying his crown against the back of his neck to protect the scars around his skull.

So be it. Death had stalked him for months, ever since he'd fled across an ocean and landed on the beach of this strange new world.

Luceran pulled his wings in, sharpening his body into an arrow, and plunged in fast. Fire burned in Akiem's throat. He boiled it, readying, breathing hard. It seemed cruel that in what might be his final moments he felt almost as alive as he had with an elf.

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CHAPTER 14



Zane

“BY ALUMN, *THAT’S* THE KING...”

They had almost made it outside the compound when Zane heard the dragon’s roar and felt the warmth of purple fire. He’d turned to see the diamond banking over their heads, fixing the Black Prince in his sights.

“Luceran knew?” He must have known. How else could he have gotten here so fast?

“He’ll die, just like he wants to. C’mon—” Jevan tugged his arm, but Zane pulled back. What did Jevan mean? Who wanted to die? Not the prince? “Wait. He saved you—”

“And?”

Dragons screamed, chilling Zane’s blood.

Jev blocked his path back. “You want to get in the middle of that?”

An inferno warmed the sky. The sound of claws and teeth on scale set his teeth on edge. Alumn, their screaming was unearthly.

“The king will kill Akiem for letting me go. Let them kill each other.”

“Akiem?” Who was Akiem? The Black Prince? “Jev, shit...” He couldn’t abandon Akiem after the prince had saved Jev’s life. Maybe he could create a distraction or something?

Jevan grabbed Zane’s shoulder. His fingers dug in, but his glare dug deeper. “If we don’t leave now, we’ll get caught in that firestorm.”

Akiem wasn't strong enough to fight the king. Even Zane knew that. Akiem knew it too. Oh, Alumn, he'd sacrificed himself, knowing this would be the outcome. His life for Jevan's—for an elf's.

Zane shoved Jev's grip off. "I can't leave."

Pain flashed across his face. He tasted dirt and grass, realized somewhere in the blur that Jev had struck him, and then nothing.



FIRE THROBBED through Zane's jaw. Groaning didn't ease the pain, but it seemed fitting that Jev should hear. He cracked an eye open and found his friend in a chair beside his lodgings bed, frowning. Nothing new there. "You hit like an elfling."

Jev's lips turned down in regret. "I told you I'd knock your pretty off."

Zane grunted and swung his legs off the bed. He still had his clothes on, so it hadn't been one of *those* drunken nights. Then he recalled the purple fire and the screams of dragons and why Jev had hit him: Akiem. That was the dragon's name. It was a good name, for a dragon. "Is Akiem dead?"

Jevan let out a long sigh. "I went back because I knew you'd damn well ask. There's blood—not enough for a kill—and some ruined buildings. He's alive, or he was when he left." He didn't seem pleased about that.

Zane prodded his jaw, finding it swollen. He *would* have gone back for Akiem, and it would have been the wrong thing to do, but only because Zane was elf. There was nothing he could have done to stop the battle between Akiem and Luceran. Had Jev saved his life? Again? "You're a bastard."

Jev finally grinned, any awkwardness fading. "What happened between you and him? You didn't fuck him...?"

"No. Maybe."

Jev fell back in the chair, rolling his eyes.

"I mean, it wasn't like that. It was, but... Okay, fine, yes, I took his coin and used him to get you out." Hearing it out loud made it sound like a shitty thing to do, but it had worked. Jev was here, alive. That had to make it all worth it?

Jev offered his hand. "You're insane." He smiled, and that smile offered Zane some relief from the guilt.

Zane gripped his hand, yanked him close, and wrapped an arm around him. “You mispronounced, ‘*Thank you, Zane, for saving my life.*’”

Chuckling, Jev extracted himself from the embrace. His laughter faded. “I know you. In every town we pass through, you act like you don’t care about anyone or anything, but I haven’t forgotten Oldport.” Jev let the name-drop simmer in a small silence. “You’d have gone back for the dragon, even knowing what he is.”

The mention of Oldport had Zane burying his face in his hands. Shit, Oldport had been a clusterfuck of mistakes and imprisonment, and escape right after. He’d done some things, said some things, maybe gotten his heart broken too. But this was different.

Zane had been about to deny this was anything like Oldport, but Jev continued. “Whatever went on between you two, he’s not right in the head. You must see that?”

That was why Zane couldn’t stop thinking about him. “Akiem is different.”

“Yeah, the mad kinda different. He nearly killed me.” Jev rubbed this neck.

It wasn’t as though Zane thought Akiem was good. He knew what the Black Prince was capable of, but Zane had only seen him show aggression toward other dragons, not elves. But Jev *was* bruised.

“He hurt you?” Zane asked, dreading the answer.

Jevan rose from the chair and headed to the window. “I told him the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“About what he is. About him being a coward. He knows what Clarion does to elves, and he doesn’t give a shit. That makes him as bad as the rest.” He leaned against the wall beside the window and crossed his arms.

Zane could imagine how that conversation had gone, and perhaps why half the furniture had been smashed before his arrival. If Clarion raped them, Akiem definitely gave a shit.

“Clarion has others?” he asked. Of course the lord did. Every month, he got a fresh delivery of elves to fill his belly and satisfy his needs. “You saw them?”

Jev nodded, looking outside. “We won’t let this stand.”

He’d been lucky to get away. Had Clarion touched him too?

Jev caught Zane's rapidly falling expression and added, "He didn't hurt me, not like the others, but he would have, eventually. I guess I owe your dragon thanks for that, if nothing else."

Shit. This whole damn city was cursed, but Zane couldn't leave, and from that determined look on Jev's face, he wasn't going anywhere either, not until they stopped the elf trade, one way or another. "The full moon is in five days—"

"Four. You slept through a day."

"Clarion will be waiting for us."

Jev sucked in air through his teeth. He stared out the window like he could see the future and their place in it. "He knows we're coming."

Jev put on a brave face, seeming like a pillar of strength. He always had. He was Zane's rock, but he had cracks too. "Are you up for this?"

His throat bobbed. "I've never wanted to see a dead dragon more than that diamond-lizard."

Zane dug in his pocket and, approaching Jev, held out the locket. "Didn't want it to get stolen while you were gone."

Jevan's face fell. He took the locket, pooled its chain on his palm, closed his fingers around its tarnished shimmer, and swallowed. "It's time we fought back," he said with conviction.

"Yeah, it is."

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CHAPTER 15



Akiem

HE TUCKED his nose under his tail and squeezed his eyes closed. The pain had never left him. He still felt the king's claws and teeth beneath his scales. Shifting would fix that, as long as the wounds were clean. He'd licked them as best he could. But shifting meant thinking as man, talking as man, and living with the hurt and confusion as man, and he wasn't ready. Dragon was easy. Dragon was better. He had scales to hide behind. Teeth to display in warning. Claws to scratch. Nobody but Luceran dared approach him.

The ungrateful elf, Jevan, had gotten away. Zane too.

That was good.

Only, he had the gut-sinking feeling they'd be back. Zane alone might have left, but not his angry companion, and they were a team—a small pride of elves.

Elves didn't know when to quit.

Then there was the problem of the elves in Clarion's *care*. Zane had said the lord collected them at the full moon.

Akiem had a problem with that. He'd saved one elf, but it wasn't enough. Denying he cared just delayed the inevitable. He'd denied himself many things his whole life. His attraction for males, the ability to think and fight for himself, the fact elves were as worthy of life as any dragon. That

last one would get him killed quicker than the rest. Gods, Mother would laugh to see him now. It had begun with her. He hadn't seen it, couldn't see it. He'd always been on the inside looking inward. Now, from the outside, looking at himself, the view was very different.

He'd always tried to be something for someone else. He'd never tried to be himself.

To be anything, though, he needed to survive.

He had to play this smarter.

Play it harder.

All here thought him weak, thought him beaten and pathetic, thought him Luceran's pet who came when called and was beaten when he misbehaved. So he'd play the pet. He'd damn well revel in it, because if he knew anything about jeweled dragons and their courts, it was that when one fell, another stole its place. Clarion eyed the throne. Luceran either didn't know or didn't care. Beneath it all, elves looked on, beaten just like Akiem and abused... waiting to bite the dragon-hand that fed them.

Eventually, Clarion would destroy Luceran or vice versa. Akiem just had to nudge them along to speed things up. *That* he could do. If he were more confident, like Zane, he could play the king's desires, but there were other ways to manipulate. The Amethyst Queen had taught him, and he was fucking amethyst. Defiance was in his blood.

He huffed at the empty chamber, untucked himself, and invited the shift, spilling all his dragon-self into the tight restraints of wingless flesh and human muscle, then went in search of his chamber, fresh clothes, and a king to topple.



AKIEM WAS NOT PERMITTED inside Luceran's inner council. No one had told him as much, they didn't need to. As an outsider, he had no seat at the command table and never would, but there were few better places to make a statement than in front of the most powerful dragons this side of the ocean.

Nobody expected him to walk into the meeting, and so nobody stopped him when he rounded the table, knelt beside the king's chair, and took his slim hand, placing a delicate kiss across the back of his fingers. Akiem

rubbed his cheek across the same spot, letting some dragon bleed through. "Forgive me."

Luceran pulled his hand free and threaded his fingers into Akiem's hair, stroking it back from his face and summoning a purr from him.

"Please excuse us," Luceran dismissed the others. Akiem caught Clarion's narrow-eyed glimpse before he strode from the room behind his lordly peers.

"I did not expect to see you so soon." The king's lips lifted in a small smile. With Akiem on his knees, Luceran peered down at him.

"I could not waste time recuperating, knowing what I do. I fear for your safety. There are plots—"

"Ah, Clarion."

Akiem dared to place a hand on the king's thigh. His warmth reminded him of another's, one with a smile made for late nights by firelight. He wasn't afraid, not now. He could fear this later, after it was done.

Luceran stroked Akiem's cheek and hooked a finger under his chin, urging him to rise. He did, but only enough to press himself against the king's knees. Seduction was not in his nature—seducing males was unbroken ground—but he'd felt Zane's readiness in his hand and kept that thought at the forefront of his mind. The elf had given him a gift. Akiem had tasted male pleasure and wanted more. He could use that gift for his own means, perhaps in the same way the elf had, but Luceran paid Akiem with trust, not coin.

Luceran parted his knees and bowed forward. His braid of white hair fell from his shoulder. Akiem pulled the band free and teased the interwoven locks apart. Luceran's eyes observed, reading his face. The king moved in, his mouth so close to Akiem's that anticipation sizzled on his lips.

"Why now?" he whispered.

"Change is coming," Akiem said, matching the king's breathless tone, teasing his mouth away. "Clarion sought to recruit me, bribing me with gifts."

"The elf who escaped you. He was a gift?"

Akiem swallowed. "Clarion poisons your brood from the inside. He undermines you, even now."

The king's hand slid into Akiem's hair again. His fingers twisted, applying enough pressure to turn his head away and expose his neck. The

king's soft, warm cheek brushed Akiem's in a dragon-like gesture.

"You think I do not know my own brother?" A dangerous note tightened Luceran's voice.

"I do not presume to know what you think. I owe you my life. I am yours. He believes he can manipulate me and turn me against you. He is wrong."

Luceran's lips skimmed Akiem's jaw, the touch featherlight. "Then you are the first," he whispered. "He excels at finding my pets' desires, bribing them, and turning them against me. Why do you think all my previous lovers have perished?" His whispers brushed the corner of Akiem's mouth, a tease and promise. Akiem's breath raced. "But not you, my black prince. You are different." His fingers tightened in Akiem's hair. "And dangerous because of it."

The king's mouth crashed against Akiem's, ferocious with urgency. The strength behind it rocked Akiem on his knees. He dug his fingers into the king's thighs, wrenching a gasp from the male and notching up his own need. But it wasn't Luceran Akiem kissed, not in his mind. The damn elf had rooted himself in place of the king, his mouth the perfect and wicked tease, his body strung tight like a bow. Luceran tasted like dragon, citrusy and sharp. Akiem's mind wiped that fact clear and replaced the taste with the sweetness of pine and forests at dawn. The king tore the kiss apart, wrapped an arm around Akiem's back, and dragged him forward.

"I fear for you," Akiem said against his neck, placing the words close to his ear. How easily the lies came now that he'd given them permission. Was this how Zane did things? Had he thought of another while they'd been together? Had any of it been real?

"Don't fear for me, my prince. There's no need."

"Kill him," Akiem hissed, so very dragon. "See it over with."

"And there is the truth of you, my black prince." His teeth grazed Akiem's throat, the warning clear, the pleasure exquisite, until he recalled another dragon's teeth at his throat.

Fear tried to sink its claws in. Akiem pushed back, holding Luceran down with one hand while he pressed the other against his cock. The position saw him higher than the king, but Luceran either didn't notice the lapse in protocol or didn't care. He clutched Akiem's hand, grinding it where he needed it.

Akiem climbed into the chair, straddling Luceran's thighs, trapping him, and kissed him hard and fast, like these were his last breaths. If he failed in his seduction, they might well be. If he succeeded, they might be too. The balance was important. Not too much. He needed the king keen, needed him fucking lost in want and distracted by the chase—a chase Akiem had no intention of finishing.

Akiem pulled away and rose. He flicked his hair back and threw Luceran a look he'd learned from an elf, not entirely sure it would work. He bit his lip and ran his gaze down the male's heaving chest, envisaging elf beneath him. Acknowledging his wrongs, and owning them, made this so much easier.

Luceran's hands rode up Akiem's chest, bunching the shirt and skimming over bruises the king's claws had delivered.

Akiem flinched.

"Not yet..." The king measured his breathing and glanced around him, recalling where they were. The passion in his eyes snuffed out in a blink. "Rest. Heal."

The unexpected withdrawal and oddly sympathetic words tripped Akiem's thoughts. Luceran wasn't supposed to think like that. He was all want and take, like all dragons. This was... baffling.

He fell in for another kiss, hoping to reignite Luceran's lust, but the king turned his head. "Rest," he growled. "Heal. When this happens"—he grasped Akiem's hair and ran it through his hand—"and it will happen—it will be glorious." He pushed Akiem away, got to his feet, and straightened his clothes.

Akiem leaned heavily against the table, lips tingling. He hadn't expected this... kindness. It wasn't how things were meant to be. Luceran was cruel and vicious. He was jeweled. All they cared about was owning and taking and controlling.

"Retire to your chambers," the king said, delivering weight behind the order by holding Akiem's gaze.

"Are you punishing me?"

"No," he replied curtly. "Akiem, both parties must be willing." The king bowed his head, took a moment to collect his thoughts, and said, "You are not ready."

How did Luceran know? Akiem filled his lungs and sighed. He wasn't supposed to look at him this way or think this way.

“I am no beast,” Luceran said. “I will not do to you what was done in the past.”

Akiem’s heart seized. The diamond king *cared?*

Luceran nodded, his point made. He left without looking back, and Akiem wondered if he truly knew the dragon he was about to betray.



“I TOLD you not to lose the elf!” Clarion marched down the corridors toward his tower.

Akiem followed, keeping up with his breathless pace. “I’ll deal with it.”

“Forget it.” The lord laughed his typically hollow laughter. “The problem will resolve itself once his companion dies.”

Zane. That’s where Clarion was headed. Akiem had steered clear of the lord during the last few days but kept within range to watch for his departure on the full moon. That moment was now.

Clarion threw open the door into the chamber with its one open wall. Outside, a fat full moon hung low in the night sky.

“Allow me to make amends.”

“I warned you he was fiesty. Did you at least get what you wanted from him?” Clarion saw his expression and snorted. “Akiem, if you cannot handle one little elf, how can you handle what is to come?”

“Luceran knows you’re plotting against him.”

“Of course he does. We’re of the same damn brood.” Clarion approached the edge of the building. The wind whipped inside, stirring up dust devils. That same wind took hold of the lord’s hair and lashed it across his face, as it did with Akiem’s, forcing him to sweep a hand up to hold it back.

“I hatched moments before him,” Clarion said. “His rule should be mine. All our lives he’s known I’d come for him. Every day he wonders, *Is this the day?* It’s my own game.” Clarion backed toward the edge. Throwing his arms out, he presented a compelling image of a dragon on top of the world, his white shirt billowing and his snakelike hair scattered by the wind. “Everything is about to change, Akiem. This ridiculous peace with elves... it is not the dragon way. You know this. I see it in your war-weary golden eyes. Are you ready for a revolution?”

“Let me fly with you.”

The lord grinned. “Very well, but keep up.”

He stepped backward off the edge and dropped from sight.

Akiem’s stomach flipped empathically moments before the diamond dragon soared high. Clarion opened his jaws and roared at the moon, appearing to swallow it. He looked silver in the moonlight, but he wasn’t metal, just jeweled.

Akiem’s heart stuttered its irregular beat. Hot, hungry blood warmed his veins, itching for the shift. He broke into a run. The edge came closer, the darkness yawning beyond it. His boot hit the lip, and he launched away from the safety of the building, and fell. The wind took him, toyed with him, tore and snatched at his clothes, hair, and skin. Gods, falling was freedom. The shift exploded through him, ripping him open. He flung out sore, battered wings a moment before the ground could embrace him.

He swooped low and pulled up, gravity yanking on his insides. But by the Great Ones, there was no other feeling like it.

The city streets and buildings peeled open below, lanterns glistening in nooks and corners like dew on long grass. Human towers clawed at the sky. Akiem skirted around them, cutting in close enough to dislodge rubble in his wake. His tail flicked, lashing wide, streamlining his balance.

Clarion shone ahead, threading through towers. Moonlight made him knifelike and lit him up for Akiem to follow.

Akiem beat his wings and gained altitude, but slowly. Still, the higher he climbed, the more of the city he saw. Colder air nipped at his wingtips and tail. In the dark, he was hidden from any onlookers, while Clarion was a beacon.

The lord slowed, needing to climb now that the buildings were too dense to fly through safely. Akiem circled above and watched two jeweled dragons glide in. The three alighted atop a smaller building and shifted. Akiem opted to circle and observe, knowing stealth kept him hidden. Hidden above it all was how he preferred it. Even in the moonlight, he’d be difficult to pick out from the ground.

It was then he saw a slice of light to the west, sliding in from outside the city. Another dragon. Another diamond dragon with a jagged crown. Luceran.

Below, Clarion didn’t know his brother approached.

Akiem stayed high, stayed hidden, and watched.

CHAPTER 16



Zane

CROUCHED IN THE RUBBLE, downwind from the west gate, he watched the meeting in the street unfold. He had his longbow angled sideways to keep its arch hidden. Clarion made the perfect target, as did the sniveling Killian, but Zane's arrow was not meant for the elder. Not today, anyway.

He couldn't see Jevan, but he'd be where they'd planned, his bow similarly lined up on the target. If Zane missed, Jev wouldn't.

"Good to see you again, Killian." Clarion slapped the elder on the back and embraced him in an overly familiar hug that rattled Killian to the core. He paled and wiped his brow.

Zane cast his gaze farther into the darkness behind the dragon. Clarion wouldn't have come alone, so where was his entourage?

"What do you have for me tonight, elf, eh?" Clarion hooked his arm around Killian's shoulders. "I wonder, do you ever make a list and pick the elves that pissed you off this month? The ugly ones? Eh, tell me. I won't tell another soul. Your secrets are safe with me."

His behavior was off, almost drunk, as though he were deliberately overexaggerating. Zane nocked an arrow but didn't pull the string back. He needed to see the elves Killian intended to trade first.

"Come now, don't be shy." Clarion grinned, showing perfectly white, blunt teeth.

“Hello, brother.”

Zane blinked. The gray-clad king approached along the same path Clarion had used. Clarion stilled. He hadn’t expected his arrival. The lord’s arm slipped from around the elder. He turned to face Luceran and lifted his chin.

“I put an end to this barbaric practice last year, did I not?” Luceran tilted his head and glanced up, as though seeking something above, but the look happened almost too quick to register.

Clarion snorted. “It’s just elves.”

Luceran’s gaze thinned. That had been the wrong thing to say. Luceran didn’t care about elves, but he cared about dragons following his laws. Apparently, his brother wasn’t exempt. “Killian, I apologize on behalf of my brother. He should not be trading with you. All agreements are rendered null and void. You may leave.”

A growl rumbled from Clarion while Killian scurried off.

“You apologize to them?” Disgust dragged Clarion’s tone down and curled his hands into fists. “Have you gone mad?”

Luceran squared up to his brother. Their differences were stark. Luceran was the cut diamond, while Clarion was uncut and rough. “Peace is an art, one I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Peace?” he snorted. “Fuck peace. Treat them as equals and they’ll rise up against you.”

“Equal, no, but we have an understanding, and because of that understanding, our city grows, as do our dragon broods. This equilibrium serves both races.”

Clarion recoiled. “It’s like we weren’t hatched from the same nest.”

“Sometimes, I wish it were so.”

“Then what is this?” Clarion shrugged. “Will you punish me like your little pet?”

“No. This ends now.”

The breeze washed the taste of magic from the dragons and over to Zane’s hiding place. They were close to shifting, and if that happened, they’d be impenetrable to arrows. He couldn’t wait for one of them to come out the victor of any impending fight. He wouldn’t have another chance like this, with Clarion out in the open and distracted.

“Brother...” Clarion spread his arms. “Take your best shot.”

The shot would be Zane's, and he had to take it now. He drew the string back, the wood creaking, aimed at Clarion's back—

Jevan's arrow flashed toward the dragons—toward Clarion—but the wind changed, whipping dust around the street and dislodging the arrow's trajectory, sending it straight into Clarion's sights. Impossibly, the dragon saw. He twisted and caught the arrow in mid-flight. Carrying it forward, he punched it home, straight into his brother's chest.

It happened so fast. Zane blinked, struggling to register the truth. Luceran shifted in a blast of white scales, filling the street with dragon. His roar was a terrible thing never meant to be heard. He clawed at his chest, tearing scales off, and lurched sideways. The arrow was still embedded in his chest. The shift had migrated the arrow, lodging it somewhere inside him—a death sentence.

Darkness flew in over Zane's head. Zane ducked.

Akiem skidded into a landing, tearing up asphalt under his claws. Clarion hadn't shifted, and when Akiem's wings lifted, the lord wasn't anywhere on the street. Zane searched the ground, the rubble, but there was no sign of the lord. He must have fled.

Luceran staggered, wings thrust out, awkwardly trying to catch the wind as though he could escape the arrow killing him with every breath.

Zane knew a dead dragon when he saw one.

With Clarion gone, it was time to leave. He backed away through the rubble, careful to stay low while keeping watch on the dragons. Akiem tore at the king's chest with his teeth, ripping open a fresh wound, but the king was down, panting his last breaths, his struggle dwindling.

Zane turned away. He didn't need to see the king die.

A terrible keening sound smothered all other noise—a lonesome, empty whine that followed the dying into their final moments. The sound came from Akiem, and it did something to Zane's heart. His breath hitched.

Zane stayed quiet, and slunk away.

The king was dead.

Clarion was king.

That changed everything.

Tomorrow would be a darker place for elves.



“WE NEED TO MOVE.” Zane shoved everything he owned into his traveling bag and cinched the string tight, then slung it over his shoulder.

“We can’t leave the city.” Jevan stood guard at the window, his fingers peeling back the drapes an inch, enough to watch for oncoming dragons. “We started this, we finish it.”

Finish it? Finish it how? Panic clawed at Zane’s thoughts. The arrow had been meant for Clarion. That would have finished things. Now they’d started something far worse. Clarion’s death would have changed things for the good of elves. Luceran’s death changed *everything*. The king had kept the peace. The wrong diamond was dead. How had that even happened, and why the fuck wasn’t Jev racing to get the hell out of here?

“Not leave the city, just... leave this lodging, this area. We need to go to ground before dawn, before we’re found—”

Bells chimed nearby, rattling the windowpanes. Zane hadn’t known this city still had bells. He looked at the window, at the red light of dawn creeping around Jevan like a warning.

Gods, Clarion would spin the king’s death to his advantage. Elves had assassinated the king, and they’d all be punished.

“What did we do?” he whispered.

Jevan turned and pointed a finger at Zane. “We didn’t do this, yah hear? That wasn’t... It wasn’t supposed to happen like that. It was me. I did this. I... the wind... and Clarion—he was fast. I’ve never seen a dragon move so fast.”

And Akiem’s whine, Zane silently added. Had the Black Prince cared for the king after all? Akiem might have seen the arrow from above, might even know who’d fired it. He might come for them.

Zane adjusted his bag over his shoulder. “There’re lodgings at the southside, by the old Alumn chapel. It’s farther from the compound. We’ll hole up there and figure this out.”

“I meant to hit Clarion,” Jevan said, as though repeating it would change the outcome. He ran a hand through his tightly braided hair and bundled it against the back of his neck, wincing hard, holding himself in check. There wasn’t time to patch Jev up. That would have to come later.

“It’s done. We have to leave.”

They’d made it outside the lodging when a familiar figure approached. Although cloaked, Arlo’s slim frame, light-footed walk, and chinking bangles gave him away.

“Go on,” Zane told Jevan. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“You’re leaving?” Arlo lowered his hood and glanced back at Jevan, already marching away. Arlo had paled, or perhaps it was the ominous red dawn light that made ghosts of them all. So much had happened that Zane hadn’t given Arlo much thought.

Zane drew him into the shadow of the lodge’s doorway. “You should leave too. Things are about to get difficult around here.”

“The bells? Did you hear them? You know what happened, don’t you?” He gently rested his hand on Zane’s arm. Zane covered it with his own and carefully removed it, giving his fingers a squeeze.

“The king is dead. Clarion will rule. It’s no longer safe for us near the compound.”

Arlo rocked back and fell against the wall. “The king is dead? Alumn help us,” he breathed. “Where are you going?”

“Southside. Do you have anyone, any kin you can stay with?”

He bit his lip and shook his head. “I came up the coast alone. Bayston was supposed to be a sanctuary. I don’t have anyone or anywhere to go.”

The story was the same for most elves, because there was nowhere else to go. Alumn, Zane’s heart ached for his kin, and for what was surely about to happen. “Go to the southside. I’ll meet you there and help you find somewhere until... until this blows over.”

He offered what he hoped was a confident smile.

Some of the lines around Arlo’s eyes softened. He nodded, pulled his hood up, and stepped away, his hand reluctantly falling from Zane’s.

Zane watched him turn and hurry back toward the bar. Other residents stirred awake, disturbed by the now-silent bells. He couldn’t warn everyone. It was better he didn’t and slipped away unseen. There was still a chance Clarion wouldn’t act, that nothing would change and the dust would settle.

Pulling up his own hood, Zane ducked his head and walked south, along roads the morning sun had soaked red.

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CHAPTER 17



Akiem

HE LANDED SOFTLY and lowered the king's body on the rooftop, freeing it from his jaws. The arrow must have struck his heart and stayed there when he'd shifted. The shot had been fatal the second it landed. Akiem aligned his wings, pulling them in close. These feelings were... unfamiliar, as though he had been tipped off balance, or like he was watching everything through someone else's eyes. It seemed impossible that the king lay dead. Luceran was still warm, and if it weren't for Akiem's own thudding heart, he was sure he would hear the king's heart beating still.

Lifting his head, he spotted three dragonkin by an old elevator stack, all waiting in their human forms. One he recognized from Clarion's table during the feast. The other two were new faces.

Akiem shifted and approached. "I witnessed it all. The king's death was an accident." True enough. He had seen it all from above: the hidden elves with their bows drawn, and Clarion's men coming in behind them, intent on ambushing them. Luceran had abruptly stopped the meeting; he'd known about the elves too. The arrow should not have landed where it did, for more reason than just the change in the wind's direction. Reasons Akiem planned to investigate after he'd seen Clarion.

"An accident?" one of the dragons asked. "How convenient for you."

Akiem slowed, and the dragons fanned out, preparing to flank him. "I had no hand in Luceran's death."

"Killed him before he could kill you? It always ends the same way for his toys, but I didn't think you had it in you... outsider." The dragon produced a length of reinforced chain from behind his back and pulled it tight between his fists. "Come along easy now."

"It wasn't like that..."

The second and third dragons circled behind.

Akiem stood his ground, anticipation of violence drying his throat and sending adrenaline pumping through his veins. "I didn't kill him."

"You'll face the axe before the entire city." The one with the chain grinned. "The elves working with you have already been dealt with."

Zane and Jevan were dead? The unbalanced feeling he experienced almost tipped the world on its edge. Akiem staggered back a step. They saw a conspiracy to bring down the king, one Akiem had been a part of. He'd let the elf assassin escape, he'd conspired with them to kill the king. Arguing his innocence wouldn't save him from Clarion's axe. The lord had likely planned this all along. Akiem was Clarion's scapegoat. Gods, he should have seen it.

He breathed in. There was only one way out of this, with blood and violence and the rabid part of him desiring such things stirred awake. The leftmost dragon lunged in. Akiem had seen him tense for the strike and twisted away. He carried through with the movement and landed a punch to the dragon's throat, dropping him. All the restrained rage and bitter injustice broke from Akiem's control wide open. He lunged at the second, sidestepped a haymaker punch, and kicked the dragon's weight-bearing leg out from under him. The clumsy fool reeled and fell.

The chain looped Akiem's throat. Metal bit into his neck, shutting off his air. He clawed at the links, tasting metal on his tongue. Or maybe it was blood. The fallen dragon clambered to his feet. Akiem yanked himself and his captor forward, spat in the face of the one on the floor, and thrust an elbow back, knocking the air out of the dragon holding the chain. Its links loosened. Akiem tore the chain free, whirled, and whipped the chinking links across the dragon's face. Blood and bone sprayed. Akiem wasn't done. He swung the chain down on the one he'd blinded with his saliva. It didn't end there. The dragon fell to his knees. The chain landed across his back, ripping a cry from him. Blood splashed Akiem's smile. Again, Akiem

brought it down, the thudding in his head too loud for reason to break through. Again and again. His veins *burned* with the violence now set free. Blinded by vicious rage, he wanted *more*.

When it was over, the three of them lay torn apart, steeped in pools of cooling blood. He tasted their blood on his lips, so very much like metal, and tossed the chain among their ruined bodies. He should care more, care for *something*, but he felt only the lust for violence sizzling through his veins.

He was done with dragons.

Running to the edge of the roof, he shifted and climbed high into the red-soaked morning sky. Bells rang out in alarm behind him, either to announce the king's death or Akiem's escape. Either way, there would be no returning to the compound. He had another destination in mind, and eyeing the waking city below him, he prayed to whatever god would listen that he wasn't too late to save two elves.

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CHAPTER 18



Zane

HE PAID TOO much of Killian's stolen coin for a week's rental of an old brownstone terrace, propped up by its rundown neighboring buildings. Alumn's abandoned chapel, with its broken windows and torn flags, gaped from across the street. Zane hoped it wasn't a sign of the desolation to come.

He slotted the key into the front door and pushed inside the cold dwelling. Jevan followed. Morning light spilled in through the windows, revealing modest rooms with minimal mismatched furniture. It would do. Zane dumped his bag in the hallway and climbed the stairs. There were more rooms than they needed. Perhaps Arlo might be grateful for a place to stay? Although inviting him under the same roof as him seemed like a bad idea. The lad might get the wrong idea. Others would need help too, though Zane could only stretch his coin so far. He couldn't save them all. *It still may not come to that.*

He opened the door to the attic room. The strong scent of blood and dragon wafted over him. The door swung inward. Zane reached for his dagger. Jev did too, judging by the rustling behind him.

The Black Prince sat upright and regal in a chair by a huge open window. Dark stains marked his dark clothes. Blood splatters had dashed his face and dried there. He didn't smile. Just the slightest pinch of his brow

acknowledged Zane before his gaze slid to Jevan. The frown darkened with suspicion.

“There are two dragons approaching this residence from the front,” he said. “They’re here to kill you.”

Jevan made a low-throated growl. “We’re supposed to believe you’re here to save us?”

He turned to tell Jevan to back down, but a thump from downstairs signaled the three of them were no longer alone. Jevan darted silently out of the room. Zane freed his second dagger but caught Akiem’s gaze. The dragon arched an eyebrow.

“You aren’t with them... the dragons downstairs?”

Akiem’s mouth ticked. “I’m not with the dragons, no.”

That was good enough for now. Although, by the way he’d spoken, he had more to say on the subject.

Zane crept onto the landing and, peering down between the staircase, saw the two dragons making their way up. They wouldn’t shift. They weren’t here to make a scene by destroying a block of houses. Clarion had sent them to tidy up the loose ends so the new king could create his own version of events.

Zane ducked into a side room and let the door swing mostly closed. Jev would have done the same. *Akiem’s help would be real useful right about now*, he thought the second boots hammered on the boards outside the door. Someone yelped. The sounds of a scuffle filled the next few seconds and ended with a sudden thump.

Zane eased the door open.

Akiem knelt beside a body on the landing, his dark coat pooled around him. He had hold of the dragon’s oddly misshapen and clearly deceased face, but let go and straightened when Zane emerged from the room. “Clarion will send more when these ones don’t return.”

Zane sheathed his unused blades. Rescued again. This was becoming something of a regular pattern between them.

Akiem skipped his gaze toward another room. “Jevan is fine, although I don’t believe he appreciates my interfering.”

“Are you all right?” Zane asked. The question sounded stupid now that he’d voiced it. Covered in the blood of his kin, he wasn’t likely *all right*.

“Surprisingly, yes.” A strange little smile hooked into the corner of his lips. A genuine one, Zane realized. He really was all right.

Zane regarded the cooling body. Yet again, Akiem had protected elves from dragons. Did he even know it was becoming a habit of his? “How did you find us?”

“Your friend Arlo at the bar.”

“Did you hurt him?”

Akiem returned a dry look.

“Okay...” Zane sighed and rubbed his hands on his thighs. They’d need to deal with the dead dragon. He’d have to dispose of it in a city already on high alert. Maybe Akiem could eat it? He looked up and found the Black Prince observing him in that unblinking, golden-eyed way of his.

“Jevan?” he called.

“Here.”

Zane followed the voice back to the attic room.

“There’s a body down the hall,” Jevan said. His hands shook as he reached up to wipe his face. “Alumn, I need a drink.”

He looked over as the Black Prince entered the room. Zane felt the weight of dragon at his back, and his skin prickled. Jevan eyed him coolly. There was no chance of the two of them getting along anytime soon, but he had bigger concerns.

“Clarion has declared that the three of us worked together to assassinate the king,” Akiem said. He’d placed himself against the far wall. “I am a traitor to the crown. All dragons will be urged—*compelled* to kill us on sight.”

Jevan fell into the chair Akiem had occupied earlier. “We can’t leave.”

“Leaving would be for the best.”

“We need to think this through,” Zane suggested. Leaving was beginning to sound like the only option, at least until they could form a plan. Akiem was here... and considering the dead bodies, he wanted Zane and Jev alive. That had to be a good thing.

“Thinking it through won’t bring the king back.” Akiem held Zane’s gaze, saying something important in the silence.

The dragon blinked and turned his heavy glare on Jevan. “Why did you kill Luceran?”

“I didn’t... I didn’t mean to. Shit. I was aiming for Clarion. The wind caught it.”

Akiem narrowed his eyes but said nothing more. His attention drifted back, and now that the adrenaline was easing, Zane questioned his faith in

this dragon. Zane had technically used him. Akiem had enabled Jevan's escape and likely paid a high price for it, but he still lived. The dragon had as many lives as an elf.

"I was told you were both dead. I'm glad to see that's not the case," Akiem said.

Zane considered telling him he'd been thinking the same, but Jevan's glare was drilling too deep into them.

"The king... did you care for him?" Jevan asked, probably wondering if Akiem was here for revenge.

The dragon dropped his gaze. "You believe I'm capable of caring?"

In their short time together, Zane had seen something in the prince, something more than the black-hearted ruthlessness of all dragons. On the rooftop, there had been a vulnerability to him, a fragility, but he was doing a grand job of hiding it now. Yet Zane had heard his pain upon the king's death. Akiem *had* cared, and he did hurt, and that made his presence here equally fascinating and dangerous. Did he want revenge or something else from them?

Akiem shoved from the wall and strode by Zane out the door, trailing the pungent smell of dragon blood in his wake.

"Where are you going?" Zane asked.

"To wash."

Jevan looked up, his eyes pleading with Zane for something he couldn't fathom, and called, "You're staying?"

"I have nowhere else to go." The dragon's voice sailed back to them, joined by the sound of his boots marching across the landing.

Jevan frowned. "He's staying?"

What, by Alumn, was Jevan expecting Zane to do? "He's covered in dragon blood. He crushed a dragon's skull in front of me. You want to be the one to tell him he can't stay, be my guest."

"He's dragon," Jevan whisper-hissed.

"We are all aware."

"He's a killer."

"Apparently, so are we, and he's as wanted as we are. That puts him on our side."

"I don't think that's how it works."

Jevan wasn't wrong, but neither were Zane's instincts, and they told a whole other story about the Black Prince, like maybe he was here because

he wanted to be. He could have flown a thousand miles by nightfall, but instead, he'd come to warn them, even killed to protect them, and now he was staying. That spoke volumes, even when the dragon himself did not.

Sighing, Jevan stood and approached the door. "Don't go there, Zane."

"I don't—"

"He'll rip out your heart and eat it. I'm telling you this as your friend and someone who's seen you fall before. *Don't. Go. There.*"

Zane held his glare, insulted that Jevan would even think that such a thing as Zane falling for a dragon was possible. "I don't plan to."

Jevan left, and Zane went to the window, checking that the fixings were all sealed and locked. The front door had been locked on their arrival. Akiem must have gotten in through the window or the skylight overhead. In daylight. To have known where they lodged, he must have tracked them... from above. That was a slightly unsettling thought.

He braced his hands on the sill and peered across Bayston's rooftops. Distantly, in the part of the city he'd fled that morning, dragons speckled the sky. After the battles, he'd planned never to incite their ire again, knowing it was an unwinnable fight. He hadn't planned on staying longer in this city than necessary either. And now? Zane was no fool. His easy life was over. If he stayed, he'd die. If he left, he could never live with himself. He hadn't planned any of this, and hadn't planned on meeting the Black Prince either. The fact Akiem was here had to be by Alumn's guiding hand. Akiem had already proven himself. It looked as though they needed him. He'd saved Zane at the docks and saved Jevan from Clarion—even if the fool wasn't grateful. His rescue had been more Akiem's doing than Zane's. Now the dragon was here, with them, and showing no signs of leaving. That last thought made his insides flutter with anticipation.

No, Zane didn't plan on *going there*, but he was having a hard time ignoring how the prince's presence tied his thoughts into knots, muddling them with hope and a sense of opportunity. Bizarrely, in all the years and all the places he'd passed through, Zane had never felt safer than with Akiem in the next room.

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CHAPTER 19



Akiem

THE HOUSE HAD a thing elves called a shower: a wonderful closet full of stove-heated warm rain. Such a thing didn't exist back home. He reveled in it, spreading warm hands against cold tiles, relishing the feel of water running down his back and over scars. Even after it ran cold, he lingered, letting the chill mottle his skin. Pleasure was a strange pursuit he'd never allowed himself, and certainly not in this human skin. Maybe he was coming apart. He saw no other explanation for how he had changed these last few weeks—becoming a creature of *want* where no desire had dwelled before. It couldn't all be the elf's doing, could it?

Stepping out, he found an old, rough towel and a pile of fresh clothes waiting for him. They weren't Zane's; he knew the elf's scent. This was a gift from Jevan.

He dried off, tied his damp hair in a loose bun, and pulled on the pants and shirt, both slightly too small. The shirt he let hang open but rolled up the sleeves. The pants would have to do, tight as they were. Better that than dressing in the clothing soaked in his dragonkin's blood.

Jevan waited for him in the bedchamber. The elf's eyebrows rose as Akiem emerged from the wet room.

"It's all we've got," he said, noting the tight fit.

"Yours?" Akiem tugged on the shirt's hem.

The elf nodded.

"I appreciate it."

"Look, about... the arrow." Jevan lowered his voice and glanced at the closed chamber door.

"And why you're lying?" Akiem asked.

Jevan strode closer. Akiem stiffened, making him halt. He wasn't armed, but his anxious manner frayed Akiem's already short nerves.

"The wind. It was the wind," he said again, gesturing like the comment were hardly worth voicing. He continued to look around, avoiding Akiem's steady glare.

"I'm dragon. I know what the wind was doing. I was riding it when you loosed that arrow."

Jevan clicked his tongue against his teeth, dismissing Akiem's words. "It's not what you think."

"You aimed for Luceran, not Clarion. Clarion helped it along." Zane couldn't have seen the truth from his angle, but from above, Akiem had seen it all. He'd seen the elf line up the shot on Luceran, and he'd tried to dive in to stop it. Instinct more than emotion had driven him to protect the king. "Both you and Clarion wanted the king dead."

Jevan swallowed, his throat undulating. "It was a mistake."

Was it shame that kept the elf's head turned away?

"You're familiar with a bow. You read the wind's direction and speed. Your aim was true."

Jevan stiffened and looked Akiem in the eye. "Have you never loved, dragon? Do you even know how to?" Jevan grimaced and laughed dryly. "Of course you don't. There are things your lizard mind can't understand."

"There always are." Akiem had loved once, long ago. He'd loved for his broodsister, the only true light in his otherwise dark life. Mother had butchered her. He'd found it easier not to love at all after that.

"Don't tell Zane," Jevan said.

"Your secrets are of no concern of mine, elf. Dragons will soon come for us. Whether their motivations are built on a lie doesn't matter. This was inevitable."

"Give me your word."

"My word?"

"As a prince, or whatever you are..." The intensity on Jevan's face crumbled, revealing his vulnerability. "Just say you won't tell him the

truth.”

There was much more to Jevan and his actions than the elf let on. His emotions were all over his face, but there were too many for Akiem to read accurately. “Why did you do it?”

“I—” he clipped his sentence, sealing his lips shut.

“You knew this would be the outcome. You know your actions will kill thousands.”

His shoulders fell. “I know.”

“Then why?”

Pain, that expression was real. “Just don’t tell Zane. If you do, I’ll tell him you raped me in that room while you had your hands around my neck.”

Akiem smiled, revealing a hint of teeth. The elf’s threat reeked of desperation. “Don’t threaten me, whelp. It’s not been so long since I’ve tasted elf and might gladly do so again.” He lunged forward a step, and the elf jerked back, his hand dropping to his empty sheath. “You’re alive because you’re Zane’s friend. He cares about you. I don’t. Put him at risk and I won’t hesitate to remove you as a threat.”

Jevan’s top lip curled back. “Whatever you believe is happening between you, it’s bullshit. If you’re here because you think you have a chance with him, look elsewhere, *dragon*. He used you. It’s what Zane does. Move on.”

Akiem’s smile thinned. He no longer found this elf amusing. “I’m here to help stop a war before it begins. I could just as easily leave you and your kind to your fate.”

“Maybe you should. Elves don’t need dragons to save them.”

Akiem turned away and busied himself by picking up his discarded clothes. By the time he straightened, the door had clicked closed and the elf was gone. Zane trusted him, but trust was blind by its very nature. Akiem trusted no one, least of all the angry elf who had killed the king.



DUSK FELL EARLY, hastened by dragons darkening the sky. From Akiem’s rooftop position, he watched with human eyes as they glided over the distant compound. Dying light stroked over jeweled scales, making his kin shine.

He'd spent his life trying to fit among his kind, trying to do what he thought was right, what a dragon *should* do. It had been a fucking waste.

"Thought you'd left us..." The red-haired elf leaned out of the skylight, facing up the slope of the roof.

Akiem narrowed his eyes.

When Zane didn't get a reply, he hitched himself out of the window and into a crouch. "Are you going to make me climb up there?"

"It's your choice." He'd be a fool to. If he slipped, he wouldn't survive the four-story drop to the street below.

Zane started to climb.

Akiem clenched his jaw. Was the elf fearless, or did he not see the danger? Of course, it was no concern of Akiem's should the elf wish to kill himself. Zane displayed an impressive command of balance, but still Akiem's fingers twitched to reach out for him. Finally, he perched on the ridge beside Akiem and brushed the dust from his hands and pants.

"I figured you'd catch me if I fell," he said, looking out at the dragons. Bayston's ambient light sparkled in his eyes.

Akiem might have, although it wouldn't have been pretty. If the elf had gone over the edge, he'd have needed to shift, and shifting took precious seconds. Akiem would have destroyed half the building trying to save him, and they both would have landed hard in a street too narrow for a dragon. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't test that theory."

Zane snorted, but his mood soon soured when he looked again at the dragons. "They're gathering."

"There's blood in the air." Akiem didn't mean it literally, though it would be true soon enough. His kin sensed an impending slaughter. Clarion would have called them back to the brood. Nightfall was almost upon the city. The lord might wait until dawn, or he'd attack at night, when the elves slept.

"You could have left us," Zane said. "Could have flown away." He swooped a hand through the air.

"Yes, I could have." Saying the truth aloud eased some of his mental wrangling. He'd saved Zane and Jevan, and now he'd save more, and those were the simplest, most perfect thoughts he'd had in years. "No matter how far you fly, there is one thing you can never escape."

Zane blinked. "Yourself."

A smile tugged at Akiem's lips. "Indeed."

This elf saw him. Not the Black Prince. Not the outsider dragon. He saw *him*, the truth trapped beneath layers of pretending, and all for the price of a few coins. If a few more coin should change hands, what other secrets might Zane reveal?

“Do you know where the bells are?” Akiem asked. He looked up at the jagged skyline and away from the elf, fearing his face gave away too much of these strange, shifting emotions he’d yet to understand fully. He’d been scanning the horizon, looking for the source of the earlier ringing before Zane’s arrival.

“There.” Zane pointed into the distance, where a spire cut into the skyline.

Akiem leaned closer to Zane, seeking a clearer view. Higher towers, all abandoned but bulky enough to impede flight, surrounded the human structure. Reaching the bells would take precise flying. One wrong flick of the wing and he’d hit those towering monuments.

“Why are you asking about the bells?” Zane asked, facing him.

Akiem adjusted his focus to the elf seated too close beside him. He should move back again, but now that he was looking, he noticed how the elf’s hair held gentle waves. He’d wanted to run those locks through his fingers before, and he wanted to again now. One wayward curl had fallen over the elf’s forehead. Akiem fought the urge to tuck it behind the elf’s pointed ear. He hadn’t cared about such little things with dragons. He’d fucked females, he’d had to else risk Mother’s wrath, but it hadn’t been gentle—no light touches or breathless kisses like that damn kiss in the dark room.

Zane’s green eyes fixed bravely on his—challenging or questioning, Akiem wasn’t sure which, perhaps both, but he had no answer.

Zane had asked something, hadn’t he? But lost in Zane’s exquisite beauty, he couldn’t recall the question, and now the silence had stretched too thin. He wanted to kiss him. He waited for the terrible weight of guilt and shame to bury him, but none came. The need to feel Zane’s mouth opening against his lips, to hear his breathing hasten, to watch desire pool in his stunning eyes, it consumed Akiem’s body and mind.

Akiem blinked and turned his head away, breaking the spell. He pulled a knee up to rest his wrist on and observed the distant jeweled dragons swoop and spiral. “They’ll come at night, perhaps tonight. The darkest hour will see them move through the streets as dragon. They’ll take your kind

from their homes and kill them. Your only advantage is that they can't fly inside your narrow city streets, but it will still be a slaughter."

Horror blanched Zane's face. He flung a glare at the circling dragons. "How do you know?"

"It's what I would have done, once."

"We need to warn them..." He looked toward the spire. "That's why you asked about the bells."

"I'll ring the bells to alert the city to the danger. It will force the dragons to launch their attack early, robbing them of the element of surprise. Elves will die, but more will escape into the lands beyond the city. They'll be safer there, among the trees."

Zane assessed Akiem as though trying to see through something. He clearly wanted to ask why Akiem was helping, and Akiem had no idea how to answer him. Perhaps it was for the many elves he'd slain over the years, but in truth, it was more for himself. He *could* change. He could do good. Saving Jevan had been the start, and now that he'd had a taste, he wanted more. So easy these thoughts came to him, without the others to smother them.

Instead of asking why, Zane asked, "Won't they burn us out?"

"Eventually."

Zane breathed in and sighed. "Fuck. You really think it'll go down that way?"

He knew dragons. "It will."

"I keep seeing the arrow and Clarion grabbing it... It shouldn't have been possible."

Akiem drew in a breath. "Do you trust Jevan?"

"With my life." Zane stiffened. "Why?"

Jevan's disgust toward Clarion had been evident after Akiem had saved him, but it could have been a lie. Perhaps something else had happened between the angry elf and the dragon lord during his time in the torture chambers. If Akiem told Zane, Zane would deny it. The elves were too close, and Akiem was dragon. It would look... forced, like he was jealous of the pair, or he hoped to drive a wedge between them. Zane trusted Jevan, and maybe that was enough. What was done was done. Knowing why Jevan had aided in killing the king would change nothing.

"He's a hard-ass," Zane explained. "He's had to be. We all have. This world is not kind to elves."

It wasn't kind to certain dragons either.

"Are there elves where you come from, across the sea?" Zane asked. "Boats used to ferry messages to us, but they stopped coming before I was born. I grew up assuming the elves had all died out."

"There are elves there." Akiem had known several, in the end. They had fought with a relentless persistence that had led to most of their deaths.

"What are they like?"

Those memories were sometimes the hardest to recall. "Prideful, stubborn, ruthless. They brought down my brood in a roundabout way." Gods, if Mother could hear him now, she'd bite off his wings. It was freeing to speak so honestly. To *believe* the words, to believe in *anything* and not be punished for the truth.

The words didn't brighten Zane, as Akiem had assumed they would. If anything, he seemed further burdened. Had Akiem said the wrong thing?

"You sound as if you admire them," he said sadly.

Akiem admired them now, but he hadn't in the past. "There's a fierceness in your kind." A passion he admired too, though he kept that admission to himself.

"We are..." Zane picked at the moss between the roof tiles, tearing tufts off. "We've forgotten what we once stood for. We were protectors. My ancestors were supposed to protect humans, and now we live among their ruins like rats. We failed in every way. We're cowards." His sharp teeth showed behind the harshly spoken words.

"A coward did not break into a dragon stronghold to save his friend."

"No." Zane smiled. "That was you." He stretched an arm behind him and twisted at his waist to face Akiem. "And I haven't thanked you enough."

A roof slate slipped beneath Zane, jolting him downward. Akiem grabbed him and held him firmly as the dislodged slate sailed on, flicked off the roof, and smashed out of sight on the street.

A moment of absolute silence followed.

Zane looked up and grinned. Gods, did he take nothing seriously?

"Theory tested," he said.

Akiem became very aware that he had Zane pulled against him, the male's hip digging into his thigh and their legs locked together. The position would have been intimate had they not been perched precariously on a rooftop. Any lower and the view of Zane looking up at him from between

his legs would be similar to the one he regularly summoned and also tried to forget.

“You should go inside. Jevan will be wondering where you are.” He didn’t want to let him go but holding on to him didn’t seem right either.

Reluctantly, he loosened his grip, and Zane shifted off him.

“Jevan left to find Arlo—my friend you stalked and terrified.”

“Unintentionally terrified.”

Akiem’s heart lurched at Zane’s quick smile, and then the elf dropped back inside the attic.

Akiem drew the air across his lips and tongue. Night tasted like dampness and cold. It also tasted of dragons. They would come soon, and the killing would begin. The night would be long. He feared for Zane and his people. Zane had been right—the elves here were different. They were not assassins or killers, fighters or protectors. They had carved a different path for themselves, straight into the belly of their enemy.

Akiem sank a hand into his pants pocket and found some coin, transferred from his old clothes by Jevan.

His gaze traveled to the open attic skylight and then back to the sky. They had some time...

He climbed back inside the dwelling and found Zane in a bedchamber, emptying his traveling bag onto a bed and sorting through what little he owned, oblivious to Akiem’s presence in the doorway. His clothes wrapped him in snug layers, highlighting tight thighs and the curve of his ass. What would he look like out of those layers? His skin of ivory beneath Akiem’s hands, eyes of green shining with desire, hair of fire knotted in Akiem’s fingers.

Zane stiffened.

He turned his head and caught Akiem standing frozen in the doorway. His smile froze, waiting.

It was just coin. A transaction. Zane did this nightly.

Akiem stepped inside the room and closed the door behind him with a small *snick* that sounded too loud in the silence. His hand lingered on the handle; he knew when he looked up, Zane would know what he wanted and there would be no going back.

There was no shame here. Akiem needed to feel, and the elf needed coin. Simple.

He looked up to find the elf had turned toward him. He had his arms folded and an eyebrow cocked in question.

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CHAPTER 20



Zane

THE DRAGON WAS HUNGRY. Zane had seen it in his eyes on the roof, right after he'd manufactured the fall to see if Akiem was here for the right reasons and not to see Zane dead for helping to kill the king he'd cared for. The Black Prince had caught him, proving he didn't mean them harm. The opposite, in fact. Oh, this dragon was good at hiding his desires, but Zane was better at revealing them, layer by layer by layer.

Akiem stood in front of the closed door, warring with himself. If left too long to dwell on this, he'd talk himself out of what he wanted. Maybe it would be for the best—Jevan would think so—but considering this might be their last night together, Zane was more than happy to oblige the dragon's desires, once he took that first step forward. It had to be the dragon's choice.

A mystery, this one, and pained, troubled, and tied up tight in invisible restraints. He clung to those chains as though they defined him. His eyes burned, but not with dragonsight. *Lust*. Zane had unleashed a wildness in this black prince, and he'd be a liar if he denied that he wanted to see where that wildness led.

The dragon took one step and another. Then he was crossing the floor, coming in hot, all gold-tarnished dark eyes and black hair. Gold and black,

like a summer storm breaking a too-long drought. Zane felt that heat burning him up.

Akiem halted with one final step to go, as if someone had pulled on his leash. Zane reached for his face to draw him in for a kiss, but the dragon caught his hand, twisted it, and planted two coins in Zane's palm.

Zane looked at the coins. Just two? He'd paid three before. A good thing the coin didn't matter or he might have been offended. "I'm not..."

He'd been about to say he wasn't a whore, that he'd do this without payment, but the fierceness in the dragon's eyes stalled the words on his lips. He needed this to be a service. That was how he justified fucking an elf. Without the coin, it would become personal, and Akiem didn't do personal.

Zane lifted his chin and dropped the coins into his pocket. The second his hand came away empty, Akiem struck. His warm, rough hand brushed Zane's cheek, and the other he thrust into his hair, claiming him. He pulled, and Zane answered, clashing into a kiss carried on the dragon's growl. Fuck, he hadn't been like this before. His mouth burned. His tongue invaded. Zane arched into him, opening up, surrendering to something larger and more powerful than him. Akiem closed an arm around his back and trapped him close enough to feel every inch of hardness beneath his clothes.

The sweet and tart taste of dragon tingled on Zane's tongue. The taste should have meant danger, should have scared him off like it had the elves from history. They'd have been afraid, but Zane wanted to taste more, so much more. He wanted to crawl over this damn dragon and devour every inch of him, to make him moan and undo all his restraints. Fuck Jevan's advice and that voice in his head that said this was doomed. Zane needed this. Akiem needed this. The why didn't matter. The coin didn't matter. Zane's heart ached for this tortured dragon nobody had loved. Akiem didn't need to say it; it was in his terrified touches, his fearful kisses, and the reverent way he stroked Zane's cheek.

Akiem's fingers dug into Zane's ass and hauled him so close the hard ridge in his pants nudged Zane's hip, a clear signal of his overwhelming desire. Zane rocked his hips, answering with evidence of his own raging arousal, and ran his hands up Akiem's back. The dragon trembled, but not from fear. He was holding back.

Zane tore free from the kiss and brushed his jaw against Akiem's cheek, whispering into his ear, "Tell me what you like, dragon."

His growl rumbled through Zane's chest, spilling need into Zane's eager cock. Akiem's hot, wet mouth brushed against Zane's neck, and the dragon shuddered out his obvious desire. He wanted to bite, like dragons did.

"Do it," Zane said.

His teeth clamped down, pinching the skin and sparking a barrage of pain. Zane gasped. Akiem could do more, could do worse, and the thought of walking that line between pleasure and pain had Zane's heart pounding and his thoughts emptying of everything but the feel of Akiem.

Zane cupped Akiem's cock and ground the pad of his thumb downward. The dragon gasped, freeing his teeth from Zane's neck. He sighed, breaths hot and heavy against Zane's ear. Moments ago, he'd sat on the rooftop, distant, restrained, locked behind his mask. Now he was free and in Zane's arms, his body alive and in motion.

Zane yanked at Akiem's trouser ties, loosened them, and plunged his hand inside, finding the dragon's erect cock and fitting it neatly in his grasp.

The dragon's growl bubbled again. He walked Zane backward, his mouth on Zane's, their tongues and lips giving and taking. The backs of Zane's legs nudged the bed frame, trapping him between the dragon and the bed. Akiem's pre-seed wetness soaked Zane's palm, smoothing his strokes. Zane wanted him in his mouth, inside the rest of him too. The heat of need pulsed through Zane's cock. All of him ached to be filled. Zane dropped onto the bed. Akiem shoved his knees open. A pause stilled them both in the eye of the storm. Akiem stood over Zane, lips parted, breathing hard, eyes devouring him. Zane stared back, fucking alight beneath the dragon's intense glare. In all his time on the road, of all the towns and cities he'd fucked around in, no one had looked at him in such a way.

Akiem's glare owned, and Zane's body sang with need, making him so fucking hard he couldn't think. For the first time in a long time, he wanted to feel a male inside him, to feel the power of this dragon touch him in places he hid from others.

Zane pushed up into a seated position and worked on the few buttons holding Akiem's shirt closed. After exposing his chest, Zane took a moment to admire the rack of abdominal muscles and the tight V that guided his gaze downward. He spread his hands over Akiem's chest, soaking himself in the dragon's warmth. He was so fucking hard and so damn vulnerable.

Akiem's breathing raced, as did his heart. Zane fancied he could hear it thudding.

Zane traced the tip of his tongue down to Akiem's navel. The dragon's hand clamped against the back of his head, holding him, guiding him, *controlling* him. Zane licked and nipped, clutching the dragon's hips and roaming lower, until his chin brushed the tip of Akiem's erect cock, still partially restrained inside his trousers. Zane flicked his tongue over the head. Akiem twitched. His body said what he could not. His desire was alive, and Zane was happy to answer its needs. He hooked his fingers into Akiem's trousers and pulled them down, off his hips, exposing the dragon's erection.

Alumn, dragons had it where it counted, and Akiem had more than enough to keep Zane satisfied. He took him in deep between the lips, stroking the silken tip against the roof of his mouth. The dragon's shudders grew more prominent. He tasted of salt and citrus. Zane wanted more. He wanted it deeper in a way that couldn't be met like this. Zane flicked his gaze up and found Akiem watching him with a new superheated shimmer to his eyes. The idea that Akiem might take him from behind sent pleasurable twinges down his back.

Akiem's fingers speared into Zane's hair, driving him on. Zane clutched Akiem's thigh, holding himself steady, and swallowed him down, then almost freed him, using his tongue to massage the erect shaft. The dragon's open groans signaled his pleasure. Alumn, Zane wanted to pull him onto the bed and have him braced over him.

Maybe he would be open to more, if Zane were gentle.

He pulled free, smiled coyly at the dragon peering down, and unbuckled his jacket. After tearing it off, Akiem reached in and flicked open Zane's shirt buttons, his fingers precise and fast. Zane leaned back, bracing both arms against the bed while Akiem ran his hands over his upper chest and shoulders, levering the shirt over his shoulders and down his back, where it snagged, his arms still trapped in the sleeves.

Akiem lunged in, cradling Zane's head with one hand while the other danced down Zane's naked chest. The dragon's mouth and tongue did wonderful things to Zane's neck before trailing lower, over his collarbone. Zane let his head fall back and then the rest of him. Akiem was right where he wanted him, towering above Zane, a knee braced on the bed beside Zane's hip, his shirt open, his cock exposed, his hair and eyes wild.

Akiem's hand went to the bulge in Zane's pants, the movement so sudden Zane flinched. Fear widened Akiem's eyes. He was going to bolt. Before he could lose himself in those thoughts, Zane covered his hand with his own and pushed down while bringing his hips up to meet the friction, showing Akiem how much he desired his hand there. How all of him wanted to be there, sprawled beneath a dragon, laid out for him to explore.

The fear flickered and snuffed out, and then Akiem scooped an arm under Zane's lower back and lifted him higher on the bed. His mouth was a hot, wet tease on Zane's hip, his tongue swirling. Zane looked down himself to find the dragon engrossed by the small tattoo he'd found there. Akiem flicked his golden eyes up, lashes fluttering. Zane smiled and lifted a hand, showing him the tattoo's partner on his little finger.

The dragon prowled up Zane's body, his silken black hair tickling Zane's navel, and then Akiem gently took Zane's hand and slipped the tattooed little finger between his lips. Warm, tight wetness rode over the knuckle, and Akiem's golden eyes burned, watching for a reaction.

"Fuck..." Zane panted. The tight, wet pressure promised pleasure for other parts of his body currently throbbing uncomfortably. Akiem let the finger and hand fall free. He reached down between them, cupped Zane's raging erection, and brought his mouth down to tease Zane's nipple.

Zane tipped his head back. Every touch and every tease had him wired to blow. And now Akiem was plastered against him, his chest against Zane's, his hip pushed in, and his cock trapped between them, in the dip of Zane's waist. It was all too much and too little. He wanted more, wanted Akiem arched over him, his cock deep inside. He clenched his ass just thinking of the fullness.

Zane cupped Akiem's face, making him look. "Will you fuck me?"

The dragon's stunning eyes darted, his body going rigid. "I..."

Zane pressed a finger to his lips. "It's all right. You don't have to."

"No, I..." He swallowed. "I want to. I just..."

Did he not know how, or was some other thing stopping him? Something more to do with how he trembled, restraining himself.

Akiem jerked his head up. His glare shot to the window, his eyes narrowed. Then he was moving off the bed and realigning his clothes, tucking himself away behind buttons, belts, and ties.

Zane feared he'd lost him again, but the look he threw over his shoulder at the window had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with war.

“It’s begun.”

Zane hastily dressed himself, pushing the ache of loss away. When he stood, Akiem was in front of him, too close. Longing and regret sizzled between them. For a creature who hid his feelings, he had a great deal of them crossing his face.

“Go,” Zane said, hating the word.

Akiem opened the door and was gone in a flurry of black hair. His leaving struck a fragile, untested part of Zane. Akiem was confronting danger *for elves*. Nobody would thank him—nobody even knew him—yet still he fought for Zane’s people. He fought more than the elves did. A dragon was fighting for elves. It was... impossible—a miracle, even.

Zane dashed out the door and leaned against the landing rail, looking up toward the attic room, where the sound of Akiem’s boots struck the floorboards. “Akiem?”

Moments passed in silence.

Akiem peered over the banister above, his loose hair spilling around his face. “Yes, elf?”

Shit, now he had to speak and admit too much. “Will you return?”

“If there is anything left to return to.”

“Come back. For me.”

The dragon’s eyes widened. Too much, he’d said too much, revealed too much, like maybe he wanted Akiem for more reasons than coin.

“You paid, and our session isn’t over.” He tacked on a cheap smile, a wriggling sense of guilt eating him up inside, because it was a damn lie. Akiem made Zane want to be better, to do good, *for him*, for the dragon who cared. Akiem gave him hope. He made him see the good in the world and made him want to do good. He had to come back. They were only just beginning.

The dragon nodded curtly and disappeared.

Zane winced at his foolishness. What if the coin meant Akiem was using him for sex and nothing more?

The audible snick of the attic window closing reached Zane’s ears.

He returned to his room, where the ruffled bed mocked him. A shudder tracked through him. Jevan was right. Zane was falling for Akiem and falling hard. A few coins in his pocket had never felt heavier. He didn’t do love. Not since Oldport. Not since he’d had his affections thrown back in his face and almost gotten himself and Jevan killed over so-called love.

He'd been used then, like Akiem was using him now. The dragon paid for sex. He wasn't buying Zane's fucking love.

Zane wandered to the window. Things would be easier if he could stop his foolish heart from loving those who didn't love him in return.

Maybe Akiem wouldn't return, solving all of Zane's problems.

A roar shattered the night, so loud it shook the window glass.

Akiem.

The sky was black. Akiem had vanished into the darkness blanketing the city, hoping to save it. That was why Zane's wretched heart had fallen for him. Even after everything he'd been through, when nobody else cared, Akiem fought on. Akiem made cowards of them all.



THE BELLS RANG OUT SHORTLY after. It wasn't like the sound that had woken them that morning. The bells clanged out of tune and order; they sounded as though the city had come to life and screamed its alarm.

It started slow, like nothing had changed, and Zane hoped Akiem was wrong. Then the sky above parts of Bayston began to glow, and soon, embers fizzed in the dark, like darting stars. The screams started right after. Word was spreading quicker than the fire. Dragons had attacked. More and more elves spilled from the north, filling the streets, carrying bags and the young. Some stumbled, painted in ash. Others ran blindly.

Zane stumbled out onto the street and into a steady stream of elves. They carried with them a malaise of smoke and ash and death.

It didn't seem real.

He'd started this.

Elves would die, the city would burn, and it was his fault.

Jevan and Arlo fought through the flowing crowd. Zane handed Jevan's bag over. "Tell anyone who will listen to head for the trees. They'll be safe there. I'll meet you by the old cable bridge at dawn."

The bridge was on the outside of inhabited Bayston but within the old city limits.

Arlo's gaze darted. "Can't I stay with you?"

"No. I'm going north to help others." *Toward the fires.*

A dragon sailed above the buildings, screaming its presence. Its scales shone. The firepit low in its throat glowed. The beast banked, coming back around. Akiem had said they wouldn't fly into the city, but they didn't need to. They had fire to clear the streets for them.

Zane shoved Arlo. "Go! Go now!"

The beast's firepit glowed hotter. A building blocked Zane's view, but he heard the screams. The crowd broke into a run, buffeting him.

"C'mon." Jevan grabbed Arlo. "Stick close!"

A wave of heat and light poured into the street from above. The noise *consumed*. Zane flung himself away, burying his face under his arm and against the road. Furnace-like heat washed over his back, so hot it burned his throat.

He'd die here, in the street, like thousands of others. Alumn hadn't spared him in the past for some grand gesture. It had all been for nothing.

He wished he'd told Akiem the truth, fuck whatever that meant. The coin was bullshit. They'd both needed to hear it, and now he'd never know.

The flame ended as abruptly as it had come, leaving Zane's head full of pounding and screaming.

He took a breath. Ashes and embers stung his tongue. He coughed, stirring up clouds of ash. His vision blurred, smudging the fires orange against a background of gray. Screams. Someone running. Flames tore at a figure, eating him from the outside in. Zane launched off his back foot, ripped off his jacket, and slammed into the burning male, knocking him down. He got the jacket around him and patted it down, over and over. Fire tried to leap up Zane's arms and lick at his hair, but eventually, it snuffed out.

He tasted burned flesh.

The male beneath him wasn't moving.

A glance at his face, at his shriveled lips, missing cheek, and sunken eyes said enough.

Zane scrambled off him, retching at the stench of burned skin and hair. There were others burned and fallen, dead in the street, their clothes still ablaze. He choked on ash and stumbled. So many dead in seconds. It could have been him. So many...

"Zane!"

Zane snapped his head up at Jevan's shout.

Arlo wasn't with him.

Zane searched the faces of the dead around him.

“He ran!” Jevan called.

Arlo had run. That was good. Zane looked up. The sky glowed with embers.

“Go,” he called back to Jev. “The bridge. Dawn.”

A dragon call filled the streets. It swooped in low, pulled up, and landed on a nearby rooftop. The downdraft from its wings whipped up a storm of ash and fire.

Zane brought his arm up to guard against the burning dust. His people scattered in every direction.

“South!” he yelled. “The forests, go south!” He snagged an elfling running at full tilt and turned him around, shoving him away from the flames. “South, to the woods! Go!”

He bolted, and in moments, clouds of ash ate him up.

Zane stumbled into a run, heading north to where flames clawed at the sky and steering those he came across in the right direction.

More dragons filled the sky, their calls endless. More dead lay on the street, their remains smoldering. The smell coated his throat and clung to his lungs.

He’d done this. He and Jevan. If they hadn’t gone, if Jev’s arrow had hit Clarion instead...

He had to save them all.

A blue-scaled dragon prowled the narrow street ahead. Blood dripped from its jaws, leaving a river of red in the gutters. Zane ducked into the smoldering remains of a house and found a dozen pairs of elven eyes watching him—and the rheumy eyes of an elf he knew well.

Killian either didn’t recognize Zane or didn’t care. He huddled near the front of the group, hands in his lap, rocking back and forth, muttering prayers to Alumn. His world had been turned on its head, and it was partly his fault.

Zane pressed a finger to his lips, signaling for them to be quiet, and shrank down in the debris.

Claws clicked against the road.

Growls bubbled so close they trembled through Zane’s bones.

Alumn, make it move on.

The beast huffed close by, upsetting the air with more dust and ash. Zane met the frightened gazes of those looking on. Twelve lives, like the

twelve he'd failed to save from Clarion. These weren't all children, but it didn't matter. A life was a life.

He could make a difference here, make things right.

That knowledge burned beneath his skin and through his veins, just like the fire burning the city down around them.

If Zane had fired his arrow sooner, Clarion would be dead.

There would be no bodies burning in the street.

No elven flesh sizzling.

No young'uns screaming for their mammas.

Killian bolted from safety and ran past Zane, fleeing into the street, his white and gray robes flailing.

There was a breathless moment when it seemed he might make it, and then the dragon plucked the elder off the street in his jaws, threw its head back, and swallowed. A growl burbled up its throat. It swung its head around and stared straight into the sanctuary.

Zane burst from the building and dashed under the dragon's nose. The beast reared and loosed a startled squawk. Zane glanced back. Fuck, it was huge, with a jagged crown of uneven bone.

Zane bolted over fallen blocks and slowed once the street had opened some. The beast looked on. Its glare narrowed on Zane, but it was still too close to the house. He needed to draw it farther away from the others.

Zane waved his arms above his head. "C'mon then, dragon..."

He backed up, stumbling over fallen blocks but staying upright.

The dragon saw its chance, lifted its head, rippled its lips, and started forward.

The twelve in the house would live. Maybe Zane would not. He was oddly okay with that.

"You want me!" He threw his arms wide. "Come get me."

Between one blink and the next, a wall of black plowed into the blue, thrusting claws into its side and tearing the blue clean off the street. Vast black wings blasted open, yanking the dragon's arrow-like trajectory up short. Using the sudden deceleration, the black released the blue and tossed it into the base of a tower.

Debris rained down. The tower groaned and buckled but stayed upright. As the dust settled, the blue stumbled from within the hole its impact had created.

The black lunged and crushed the blue's skull between his jaws, as if its death were no more troublesome than cracking an egg.

The black turned its head. Golden eyes locked on Zane. It prowled forward.

Akiem.

Zane staggered out of the debris.

Something, maybe a plank of wood, bounced off Akiem's neck. He pulled up and growled at the tiny figure. Just an elfling. He'd been hiding in the building with the others.

"Don't!" Zane stumbled forward. "Don't... it's all right." To the boy, he said, "He won't hurt you. He's..." What was Akiem? "He's with us." Zane looked up at Akiem, not needing to say a word. This close, with Zane standing almost beneath him, Akiem appeared as tall as a high-rise and as wide as a street, but he ducked his head and backed off.

The others emerged from their hiding place, warily watching the black dragon.

"Trust me. Trust him..." Zane waved them out. "You need to get out of the city."

Ash-stained faces blinked at him.

"Then what?" a female asked. Beneath all the ash and dirt, she wore the clothes of those with more coin than Zane.

"Worry about the rest tomorrow, eh?" he suggested, trying to smile.

Another dragon, circling above, roared.

Akiem looked up and bared his teeth. He spread his wings, stretching the dark canopy over Zane and the others, but the other dragon had already seen. It landed atop a building and crawled down the façade, dislodging bricks under its claws.

Akiem galloped forward and slammed his crown into the beast's side before it could balance itself on the street. The dragons struck the building, taking out half its foundation supports. The heavy top floors swayed.

"Get back!" Zane shoved and pulled them away from the chaos.

Thunderous tremors and hot air blasted against his back. Dust scratched his throat. He turned, coughing like the others, and saw wings thrashing and teeth flashing in the dust cloud. Akiem unleashed his fire, painting his prey in liquid purple fire. Before the other dragon could recover, Akiem buried his teeth in its throat and ripped out a mouthful of muscle, scale, and blood.

When he whirled and stalked back toward Zane, the elves huddled behind him whimpered at the sight. Zane couldn't blame them. Blood and flesh dripped from Akiem's jaws. His eyes blazed their fury. There were bigger dragons, brighter dragons, louder dragons, but Zane could believe there were few as vicious.

Akiem lowered his head, pressing his belly to the ground. He made a gentle noise, part snort, part purr, and waited for something. Zane blinked. Was he suggesting they... climb on?

"You er... you want us to..." He frowned, struggling with the idea. "Get on?"

The dragon huffed.

Climb a dragon. *Ride* a dragon? Ride *that* dragon?

The young'un who'd thrown the makeshift spear rushed past Zane. Akiem lowered a wing, pressing as much of his body as he could against the ground. The elf scrambled up the wing's leading edge and clambered to where Akiem's long neck met his shoulders.

"You all wanna live?" he called. "Get on!"

Wasn't that supposed to be Zane's line?

The rest scrambled up the wing and nestled in place, Zane the last to climb on. The wing alone felt all kinds of wrong beneath Zane's hands—tough and rough, like the scales latticed up his back. Up close, he saw the scars. Missing scales too. So many dislodged and torn.

Akiem lifted his head. Zane's stomach dropped. He fell forward and hugged a scale the same size as him. This was fine. It was all fine. The world tipped and swayed. Heat soaked into Zane's body. Akiem climbed over the rubble and circled back. Akiem looked up. The orange-tinted night sky was clear of dragons. If they met one in the air, what would happen then? Zane dug his fingers between the scales and clung on.

Akiem beat his wings and thundered forward. The wind tore at Zane, trying to pull him off. He hugged the dragon, pressing himself so close nothing could get between them, and prayed to Alumn he survived what came next.



AKIEM LANDED SOMEWHERE along the coast, outside the city limit where the forest met the sea. Other elves had already gathered on the beach. They scattered when Akiem landed but watched from among the trees as he delivered his cargo of elves.

Zane spilled off and fell to his knees. It wasn't the flight, although that might have been enough to drop him to his knees. It was what he'd seen when Akiem had carried them into the air. All of Bayston was ablaze.

Hundreds dead. Maybe thousands.

Zane fell onto a hand. His lungs wouldn't work, and his throat burned. His body was shutting down. He smelled smoke and blood and burned flesh. There were elves close by, watching him, watching Akiem, and none of them knew Zane was partly responsible for this, all because he and Jev had tried to do the right thing.

He didn't deserve to live.

A warm hand settled between his shoulders.

Zane sensed the great weight of dragon, even in his human form. He'd saved them. He'd killed for them. He'd done more for elves than Zane ever had.

Alumn, Zane was a coward. A selfish, shallow coward.

Akiem's hand burned against his back.

Zane's lungs burned too. He clutched his chest.

"Breathe," Akiem said, as if it were that simple.

"I killed them." The words came out torn. His throat burned. He could still taste the dead. His gut heaved, retching up nothing.

"Clarion killed them."

Tears blurred his vision. He lifted his head and saw the elves along the shoreline, some wounded, most crying, and others sitting on rocks, staring out to sea.

"Alumn, why? Why did this happen?" he asked. He'd always been good, done good, tried to do good, tried to fight for good. Why this?

"So many, Akiem..."

Akiem's hand slid from his back to his shoulder. It felt solid and strong, like nothing could bend or break him. Zane knew that wasn't true, because someone had broken him, but he'd survived. He'd turned it all around, making himself good despite everything that said he shouldn't be. Akiem was different. Akiem was better than them. Akiem was a fucking miracle.

Zane straightened and turned toward the touch. Akiem stood there, his clothes disheveled, his hair knotted, his face a mask of nothing, until the smallest smile tucked into his cheek. It was too much. Zane threw his arms around Akiem and reeled him in. Akiem instantly stiffened, but Zane buried his head against his shoulder, *needing* his strength, his warmth. Whatever the cost for this, he'd pay it. He just needed to *feel*.

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CHAPTER 21



Akiem

THE ELF WAS EMBRACING HIM.

Akiem's heart skipped. His breathing stuttered. He wanted to embrace him back but didn't know what it would mean if he did. It was different here, on this beach with the ocean at his back and the city ablaze. It had become *personal*.

He bowed his head, breathing in the smell of elf and filtering out the stench of war. He'd seen him on that street, goading a dragon to chase him. At first, Akiem had raged over Zane doing yet another stupid thing, and then he'd spotted the elves hiding in the ruined building and the rage had turned from an inferno to icy cold. The topaz dragon would have killed his elf.

Zane fisted Akiem's shirt. Zane wasn't thinking. He was emotional from what he'd witnessed. That was all.

Akiem wrapped his arms around him, feeling him sigh and melt against him. Strange, how he fit so seamlessly in Akiem's arms. For a moment, Akiem forgot they were on a beach, with dozens of curious elves watching them. He listened to the waves lapping against the rocks, listened to elves murmuring and the *thud-thud* of Zane's heart as it slowed. The elf just needed someone, anyone, to hold. Akiem was happy to provide comfort, even if it didn't last.

Zane pulled free, and without looking at Akiem, he clambered over the rocks, back up the beach. Akiem watched him go, feeling oddly cold as he stood alone.

“Thank you.”

“What?” He hadn’t even seen the older female elf approach or the boy huddled beside her, the same boy who had thrown a stick at him as dragon.

“You’re the Black Prince,” she said, her eyes soft and wet with tears.

He blinked at her and the elfling.

“Thank you for saving us,” she said again, as though he might not have heard her the first time.

After bowing her head in respect, she and the boy made their awkward walk back over the rocks to the tree line, where her kin waited, each one looking at Akiem with the same awe in their eyes.

An uncomfortable twisting inside made Akiem uneasy.

Following her path, he approached them. “I don’t deserve thanks, not from any of you.”

They blinked bright elven eyes at him, disbelieving his words. Damn elves.

With a frustrated growl, he moved on, seeking a quiet place where he could unpack everything that had happened and bury it somewhere in his mind all over again. He was surprised to find Zane tending the wounded instead. His senses had led him back to the elf, the dragon in him seeking him out.

Akiem watched from a distance as Zane helped those he could, but Zane’s hands shook, and more than once he needed to reach for a tree to keep himself upright. When he took off, away from the makeshift encampment, Akiem followed.

“No fires.” Akiem grumbled, passing by a pair of elves attempting to start one. “Not yet.”

Dragons would be watching for smoke. It was bad enough they were all huddled together along the shoreline.

He found Zane tucked against a tree, his elbow propped on a bent knee, his face buried in his hand.

The elf’s shoulders shook. He was... crying. Zane stared into the darkness between the trees. Diamond-like tears glistened on the male’s filthy face. Akiem silenced all thoughts that demanded he leave Zane there.

He ached to go to him, to sit beside him. Nothing more, nothing less. Just company.

The elven woman had thanked him, but she did not know who Akiem really was.

He could not care for this elf.

His place was not among them.

He turned away, about to disappear into the night.

“Stay,” Zane croaked.

Akiem sighed. He turned back and settled against the tree, tucked among the roots like Zane beside him. After a short time, the elf laid his head against Akiem’s shoulder. His breathing slowed shortly after as sleep finally relieved him of the horrors he’d seen.

Akiem stared into the trees, watching for dragons, for threats, for anything that might threaten to steal away his elf. He was insane to feel such things, but denying it didn’t make the feelings stop. The dragon in him knew the truth.

Were you looking for someone?

Come back. For me.

Akiem squeezed his eyes closed.

He cared for Zane in a way he hadn’t allowed himself to care for anything else in his entire wretched life, and that truth terrified him. Caring made him vulnerable, made him prey. Caring was not the dragon way.

He looped an arm around Zane’s shoulder as he slept and tucked him under his chin. Akiem was done with the dragon way. Whatever happened, with the elf or not, he’d find his own way going forward. The right way.



“HEY.”

Akiem blinked awake and fell straight into Zane’s smiling eyes. Shafts of sunlight streamed through the tree canopy. It was morning. He hadn’t dreamed, but he almost believed this to be unreal. Except, the more reality sharpened everything around him, the more he noticed Zane’s hair was matted and bloody, and he still smelled like ash.

Zane offered his hand. Akiem took it and let the elf pull him to his feet. Zane’s grip lingered on his hand a moment too long before letting go, or

perhaps that was wishful thinking.

“You snore,” Zane said.

“I—what?”

“Just a little.” Zane showed him the smallest gap between his finger and thumb. His cheeks still wore the tracks of his tears from the previous night, although he’d smudged much of them away. His smile was bright, like the morning Akiem had found himself in.

Akiem blinked at him, words suddenly difficult. He should tell him how he admired that smile, but in the morning light, speaking such things seemed whimsical and foolish.

“We have to go back.” Zane started to make his way through the brush. “I told Jevan I’d meet him at the cable bridge. He’ll be there. He might have Arlo with him.”

Akiem knew of the cable bridge. It was miles within the city. “It’s not safe.”

“I can’t leave them there.”

Akiem didn’t see why not. Jevan was resourceful. He’d make his way out and bring Arlo with him.

“Can you er... can you, yah know, fly me in there?”

Akiem stopped.

Zane marched on a few strides before realizing Akiem wasn’t following. He sighed and turned. “Honestly, I don’t relish the idea either. I spent much of my first flight with my eyes closed, praying to Alumn, but I gave Jev my word. I have to go back, so I either spend the day walking back, or”—he gestured at Akiem—“you can get your dragon on and we’ll be there and back in an hour.”

“‘Get my dragon on’?”

He waved the same hand he’d gestured with and frowned at the ground. “Yah know, shift.” He dragged a hand down his chin, hiding a wince.

Honestly, Akiem would have already said yes, but he was rather enjoying watching someone usually so confident stumble over his words.

“It’s not easy, carrying an elf.” He stepped closer. “You’re not particularly streamlined. I must constantly adjust to keep from tipping you off. My speed is also hampered. Too fast and you won’t be able to breathe. My range of movement is limited—”

Zane rolled his eyes and dug into his pocket. “I’ll pay.”

At the sight of the coin, Akiem lost his smile. He brushed by the elf and continued toward a clearing with enough room to shift. "Keep your money, elf. I don't shift for coin."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He hadn't intended to rile him up, but his tone had carried an edge to it. "Nothing."

"*Nothing?*" he said, mocking Akiem's voice. "Wait a second."

They reached the clearing. Akiem stepped into the sun, already imagining warm rays on his black scales. The elf appeared in the corner of his eye.

"I'm not a whore." Zane threw a collection of coins at Akiem's feet. They shone in the bed of pre-autumnal leaves. All the coins Akiem had paid him. "I don't take coin for sexual favors." Zane moved around to face him. His cheek twitched. "I should have told you, but you needed the coin to make it happen, so I let it go."

He'd lied and taken coin anyway? How was that any better?

"The distance," Zane explained.

Akiem frowned.

"You needed the distance to make it impersonal, because I'm elf and you're dragon and that's the way things are. If I hadn't accepted the coin, you wouldn't have gone through with it."

No, he wouldn't have. "You don't take coin from dragons for sex?"

Yet twice he'd taken coins from Akiem. What was he supposed to make of that?

"No. And I don't fuck dragons as a rule. You were—"

"You only got to your knees to pleasure a dragon for your friend. I understand." Akiem stepped around him and headed into the open area. Better to be dragon where all this emotional baggage meant nothing. He flexed the mental muscles, freeing the shift. "Stay back, elf."

"I'm sorry, okay?" Zane called.

"No," he replied too softly for Zane to hear. It was not okay, because if the coin meant nothing, what did? Was any of it real? Did Zane want those things, or had he been fucking with Akiem all along? The first time, yes, to save his friend. But earlier, before the city fell, what had that been for, if not to save his friend? Just for fun? Out of pity because he knew Akiem's past?

"Akiem? You're pissed. I see that. Maybe flying isn't... such a good idea. I can walk. It's... it's fine. I'll just walk..." He mumbled the last

words.

“Scared I might drop you?” Akiem called back.

The shift tore through him. When he next turned to look at the tiny elf, he towered over him as dragon. Bringing his head in low, he pinned Zane beneath his glare and sighed through his nose, upsetting his flame-red hair and the leaves around him. His tiny elf looked angry—or perhaps frustrated. It was difficult to tell through dragon eyes.

Zane sighed back. He pursed his lips and rested a hand on a hip. “You’ve gotten the wrong idea, and I can’t say it’s not entirely my fault.” Looking up, his green eyes widened some, drinking in the sight of dragon. “You’re real big as dragon, by the way, but curiously easier to talk to.”

Akiem huffed again and lifted his head so as not to crowd him.

“All right, fine,” Zane growled.

A chuckle tried to rumble up Akiem’s throat. So little, so angry, so elf.

“I don’t usually do this,” Zane continued. “Get *involved*. It’s not how I play things. I can’t, else I’d leave a piece of me in every place I visited until there was nothing left.” He stalled, restless on his feet again. “I’m shit at this. You’re shit at feelings too. Half the time, I think you want to eat me, and not in a good way, and the rest you look at me like... like we’re equal. I’m getting mixed signals all over the place. Maybe you still need the damn coin, I don’t know, but if you do, I’m not taking any more, so we’re done. You can buy your elf-kink elsewhere.”

Akiem bared his teeth. A hint of a growl began low in his throat, but it was enough.

“Shit. Fine. I wasn’t straight with you, but it wasn’t all an act. Most of it wasn’t, actually.” His confession slowed. “I don’t pretend to know what’s happening here, between us—if there is anything between us, and that’s a big *if*. You’re a dragon, for fuck’s sake.” He swept a hand at Akiem. “I’ve never done dragons. I don’t do dragons. You’re all selfish, self-righteous, vicious assholes.” He puffed out a breath. “All but you.”

Akiem chuffed a laugh. What an unexpected pleasure it was to see Zane flustered. He hadn’t been sure anything could unsettle him, but evidently real *feelings* did. Perhaps they had that in common, if nothing else. Every word Zane had spoken was true, and Akiem delighted in hearing it, because it meant Zane was having as hard a time with this whole relationship as Akiem was.

Zane winced. “I didn’t want to hurt you, okay? I didn’t set out to do that. It was meant to be a simple seduction and I’d be gone. But I hurt you, and for that, I am truly sorry. You didn’t deserve it, no matter what you seem to think. You have more than proven yourself as good. I’m the prick here.”

Akiem growled again, but this time, when he brought his head in low, he brushed his chin against the ground, as close to Zane as he could get without knocking him over. The position was subservient, but Zane couldn’t know that, making it safe. He blinked at the elf, almost crossing his eyes to see him standing at the end of his nose. He seemed sad again, and that wasn’t right. Zane wasn’t made for sadness.

“So, after we’ve met up with Jevan, can we maybe deal with some of this shit between us? No coins. Just you and me and the truth?” He placed a tiny hand on Akiem’s nose. The touch was warm and painfully gentle. “I owe you that.”

The truth? He wasn’t sure he knew what the truth was, but he was beginning to understand some of it. The only things that had felt right, felt true, were saving the elves and being with Zane.

Akiem nuzzled closer, prompting Zane to bring his other hand around and place it by the first. He spread his fingers, and Akiem briefly closed his eyes. Yes, things were more simple as dragon. He liked this elf’s touches. More than liked them. More than liked him too.

Zane rubbed his scales, and a purr strummed at the back of Akiem’s throat.

“You like that, huh? *The big-ass angry dragon likes nose scratches...*” He scratched some more, working his hands around and between scales.

Akiem nudged, almost knocking him off his feet. He laughed. Gods, that laughter was free and rich and delicious—a fine thing to hear.

Zane stepped back and gave Akiem a strange, sidelong glare, his smile climbing. “We should have tried talking like this before, as dragon, I mean.”

The elf hadn’t been ready before. Rising a little, Akiem brought his wing ridge down and waited as Zane climbed on.

With the elf safely tucked in, he took to the air, skimming the trees with his belly, keeping low to avoid breaking the horizon line.

Were you looking for someone?

He had been. Now he both feared and hoped he’d been looking for Zane, and perhaps he was ready to discover what that meant.

CHAPTER 22



Zane

OVER THE YEARS, most of the cable bridge had collapsed. Its towers leaned in, and the old cables had frayed in places and drooped. It couldn't be crossed but made for the perfect landmark.

Akiem landed gently, obviously for the benefit of his passenger.

Zane clambered off, grateful to be on solid ground, and patted the ridge of Akiem's wing, signaling he was clear. The dragon gracefully rose to his full height and scanned the nearby broken buildings, long overgrown with trees and brush. The place was more wild than Zane recalled, meaning locating Jevan might take some time. Hopefully, he'd seen them fly in.

"I'll go look for him."

Akiem barely spared him a glance. His attention stayed dutifully locked on the sky.

Zane climbed over mounds of crumbled concrete and through the brush, heading for the river. He'd said a few things back in the forest clearing—maybe said too much—but after everything Akiem had done, it was only right. After waking that morning, alarmingly content in the dragon's lap a few personal words didn't seem like such a big deal.

He'd needed Akiem last night, and the dragon had been there.

If Zane hadn't cared before, he more than cared now. He cared that Akiem should see himself for the good person he was, not a monster. He

cared that Akiem deserved someone, because he was so damn alone, and Zane knew what being alone felt like. He cared that nobody should touch Akiem in a way he didn't want ever again. If Zane were dragon, he'd make that happen, but he was elf. An elf wasn't enough in a world ruled by dragons, but he'd try to make it mean something, if Akiem would have him.

He'd talk with Akiem later, male to male, without trying to seduce him. Zane chuckled at the thought. It should be easy, *just talking*, but Akiem had no idea how tempting he was. All that restrained power and the way he softened beneath Zane's touch, while other parts of him hardened... the dragon had no idea how he turned Zane's thoughts upside down. If he knew how easily Zane had fallen for him, he'd be dangerous.

They'd just talk.

Once Jevan and Arlo were safe. Once this was over.

"Zane..."

His name pulled him up short. Jevan crouched among the brush, blending in perfectly with the greens and browns. He appeared unharmed, although ash-covered and wide-eyed.

Zane crouched beside him. "Is Arlo with you?"

"No, I haven't seen him. Where's Akiem?"

"Near. He'll take us—"

"We have to leave. Now." Jevan grabbed Zane's arm and pulled him along behind him, toward the broken bridge and away from Akiem.

"Jevan, stop." Zane yanked his arm free. "Akiem will carry us out of here. If we just—"

Jevan rounded on him. "Clarion is here."

"What?" Zane stepped closer to the brush, hoping to camouflage his outline from above. Clarion had to be above. Alumn, if Clarion was here, he had to warn Akiem. "Where?"

"I don't know. He was here and then when he saw the Black Prince, he left."

Something in Jevan's tone, and in his gaze too, set Zane's heart thumping. He stared too hard at Zane. Was this because of Akiem?

"Jevan..." he whispered. "We have to get back to Akiem. He'll carry us out of here. We can't fight Clarion."

Jevan closed his eyes. He raised a hand and rubbed his forehead. The locket dangled from his hand. "Alumn, I just wanted this to end."

This didn't make any sense. How had Clarion known they'd be meeting here? "Why is Clarion here? Did you... speak with him?"

Jevan dropped his hand, revealing his pained expression. "This is all my fault."

The things he'd seen last night had hit him hard. Zane squeezed his shoulder. "We just need to get out of here, all right? Follow me."

"I can't. We can't. Clarion... He knows Akiem is here. He wanted you, but... when he saw the dragon fly in, I guess he changed his mind."

Zane dropped his hand. Jevan had been speaking with Clarion, and he'd told the new king about this meeting? Why? When? "You're not making any sense. How is Clarion here?"

"It's better this way. He said it was inevitable. Your dragon... I mean... he said it would always end like this."

"Jevan, you're in shock. Trust me, Akiem won't hurt us. Just follow me and we'll be out of here—"

"He's not going anywhere." Lord Clarion's voice carried far in the quiet. "Isn't that right, Jevan?"

Zane turned slowly, dropping his hands to his daggers. The dragon stood beside a dead tree, as human, his white shirt and hair spotless and too perfect against the ragged elf he clutched against his chest, blade at his throat.

Arlo.

Blood had dried on his chin from his split lip. His right eye was swollen.

"How lucky I was to find this one in the rubble, squealing about knowing the two elves who have eluded me."

Zane held out a hand, trying to calm him and the situation. "Don't hurt him. He hasn't done anything."

"And his innocence matters because...?"

"What do you want? You want me? Is that it? Let him go." Zane plucked his daggers free and tossed them in the dirt.

Arlo's eyes widened.

"Take me." Akiem would be nearby. He'd hear this. He'd come. He always saved them. Zane just had to buy time.

"It's funny"—the lord grinned—"how you believe you have any power here."

He pulled the blade across Arlo's throat, opening a bloody curve, and then kicked Arlo forward. Zane caught him and fell with him to his knees. Arlo clawed at his throat, mouth opening and closing, fighting to breathe. He convulsed, almost bucking out of Zane's grip.

"I've got you..." Zane hissed, holding him tight. "I've got you, okay?" Panic shattered Zane's thoughts. He forgot Clarion, and Jevan, and Akiem. "Arlo, it's going to be okay..."

But Arlo's writhing slowed until he fell still in Zane's arms, his eyes open.

It happened so fast. It wasn't right.

"You son of a—" Zane sprang off the ground, lunging for Clarion.

The dragon swung a fist. Pain exploded across Zane's jaw, slamming him facedown into the ground.

Too strong. Didn't matter. Zane got his hands under him and pushed up. Steely fingers grabbed him, rolled him, and then Clarion's fist was on his chest, pinning him down.

"I asked Jevan, once, why he didn't tell you his secret—"

Jevan... what? Zane shoved, but the dragon's arm was an immovable steel rod. He grabbed Clarion instead, trying to force him off. He didn't move. For all his human appearance, he was dragon and a hundred times bigger than the man pinning him down. Zane couldn't fight him, but he'd damn well die trying.

"I see now," Clarion said. "You think you're good-hearted." The dragon leaned in. "Your friend thought the same about himself too, but even the good ones can be turned. It just takes the right motivation."

Zane rolled his tongue and spat.

Saliva dashed Clarion's cheek. The lord used a cuff to wipe it clean. "He was Luceran's spy before he was mine. Didn't tell you that, did he?"

No, that wasn't true. Clarion was full of shit. Zane had known Jevan for years. He couldn't be a dragon's spy. He was Jevan. Jevan *despised* dragons.

"A little persuasion applied to the right pressure points, and his arrow found its mark."

Zane didn't want to look for Jevan, didn't want to find him standing behind Clarion, not moving to help, not denying anything Clarion said. But he did look, and there Jevan was, his face haunted. Alumn, Clarion was

right. Jevan had killed the king and started a war, and he'd done it for Clarion.

"Why?" Zane asked.

Jevan's hand tightened around the locket.

Clarion must have tortured him to make him do this. He wouldn't have betrayed his kin willingly. He'd never endanger so many elven lives. Jevan was better than this. There was no way Zane would let a dragon come between them.

Clarion sighed. "You're all startlingly easy to manipulate."

Zane bared his teeth. "One day, an elf will cut your throat from ear to ear and end your wretched life, dragon."

"It won't be you." He pulled him forward, face to face.

Zane gritted his teeth and tore at the arm, but he could no more shove the dragon off than he could move a boulder.

Clarion slammed Zane down. Sparks exploded through Zane's skull and burst in front of his eyes. It didn't hurt so much as rip the world away, making space for a sudden darkness to rush in. Zane clutched his head. The dragon's weight on his chest had vanished. He tried to roll, to stand, but he couldn't see, could barely breathe. The sounds of scuffling tried to pull him back from the edge of unconsciousness, but Alumn, the heat in his head thumped too heavily, bleeding its way out of his skull and down the back of his neck.

Zane rolled onto his front and dug his fingers into the cool dirt. "Akiem...?" he whispered.

The world was falling away and taking him with it.

A new growl rumbled through the air, followed by four glorious words, "These elves are mine."

Akiem.

That final thought chased Zane into the dark.



HE SMELLED the sea and dragon and ash, and then rain. Its patter gently lured him back to consciousness. Pain throbbed down his neck and tried to empty his guts, but as he hadn't eaten in what felt like forever, he was spared that indignity.

Alumn, why was it so cold?

“Hello, elf.”

Akiem crouched beside him, an arm draped over his knee. Dark brows pinched together, giving Zane the impression that someone was in trouble. Oh right, that someone was him. He’d needed saving. Again. He’d have been fucking embarrassed if everything hadn’t hurt so much.

“Jevan...?” Speaking split his head open. “Gah.” He fingered down the back of his skull and found dried blood knotting his hair.

Akiem’s lips turned down. “I don’t know.” As he rose, he winced and tried to hide it by clamping an arm against his waist. The fresh metallic scent in the air wasn’t from wet blades—Zane had lost his. Akiem was bleeding.

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing.”

Of course he’d say that. Akiem drifted toward a nearby tree trunk and gingerly lowered himself between its roots. The wound was bad enough to impede his movement.

“Did you kill Clarion?” Zane asked.

“Regrettably, no.” He clenched his teeth and dropped his head back. “I am not the warrior I once was, nor the dragon...”

Zane saw the blood then, wet and heavy, dragging Akiem’s borrowed shirt down and gluing it to his chest. That was no minor cut.

Akiem closed his eyes. Rain patted against his pale face, dampening his dark lashes. He could be about to sleep or die. Zane heaved his wrecked body forward. His jaw ached from Clarion’s punch, but the worst of the pain throbbed down the back of his neck. It wouldn’t kill him, though. Akiem had stopped Clarion and taken the brunt of the lord’s fury.

He knelt by Akiem’s leg and touched his hand, the one clutched to his waist. Akiem’s lashes fluttered, his eyes opening slowly.

“It will heal...” he slurred.

“Will you allow me a look?” Zane wouldn’t touch him without permission.

Akiem dipped his head in an almost indiscernible nod.

Zane opened the lower buttons and peeled the shirt back. The cut was clean but damn deep. Did dragons bleed like elves? If so, the blood was dark. Not a good sign. Wounds like that could kill if left untreated, and they were likely to get infected. Akiem needed stitches. Zane rested back on his

heels and scanned the area for anything useful. The rain continued its relentless beat against the canopy. With no dry wood, a fire was out of the question. He had no supplies and no coin.

"Where are we?"

"I have no idea. I picked you up and... this was as far as I could get."

Then he'd been dragon and shifted with this wound. Such things were risky. Their magic sometimes moved wounds around, turning a minor wound fatal.

"Do dragons heal quicker than elves?" Zane asked, hopeful.

"Some do." Akiem closed his eyes again. "I'll just... rest awhile," he sighed.

Zane sat in the wet leaves beside him and then shuffled closer, so his arm brushed Akiem's. His thigh brushed Akiem's too. The dragon was *warm*. He remembered that from waking sprawled across the dragon that morning.

He checked to see if Akiem was even aware he'd moved closer and caught a small smile. "This is just... It's real cold."

"It's perfectly fine," he said, voice gruffer than it had been moments before. The same foreign-accented voice Zane had fallen for on the dockside.

Life had sure kicked him in the nuts these past few days. He'd started out with little more than a traveling bag and a friend, and now he had neither. "Clarion has something on Jevan. I know him. He wouldn't have done this willingly."

"I agree," Akiem replied, keeping his eyes closed.

"You never trusted him, did you?" Zane asked.

"I saw him aim at the king," he said, eyes still closed. "It was no accident. I don't like him, but he cares for you, and that I... That is true."

So Jev had killed the king for Clarion. If he was still alive, he'd be in the heart of the compound by now and well out of Zane's reach.

It didn't seem right. Elves had done nothing to deserve this. They'd lived by dragon laws, kept peace with them, served them, but none of it had mattered. Arlo had died for nothing. Thousands had died for nothing. Clarion had taken away ten years of peace in one night.

"The humans fought them, and they all died. We fought them, and we surrendered." Zane picked up a twig and snapped it in two. "And still they kill us."

“Destruction is the dragonkin way,” Akiem mumbled.

But destruction was not Akiem’s way. If they hadn’t been both exhausted, beaten, and bloody, he’d have asked why Akiem was so different, but that was a conversation for another time.

“What do you intend to do about it?” Akiem asked, wincing around pain. Opening his eyes, he blinked too quickly, and gently shook his head, trying to focus.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing.” Akiem faced Zane, his attention suddenly pin-sharp. The dragon had a new kind of heat in his eyes, one that stoked the waning fires in Zane’s heart. “Alone.”

Did he mean what Zane thought he meant? “You’d fight for us again?”

Akiem didn’t answer and turned his gaze to the clearing. When he next closed his eyes, his shoulders softened, exhaustion taking him. He seemed younger without the permanent scowl, more vulnerable too. A hard life had aged him, made him rough and cold on the outside. But beneath all that, he had heart.

“Don’t move.”

A scout emerged from the bushes, her bowstring stretched and arrow aimed at Zane’s chest. She wore her long hair bundled back, pinned with dagger-like needles. Her two-tone hair faded from dark at her roots to silver at its tips, sharpening her appearance. She didn’t appear to be wearing daggers, but the bow was dangerous enough. Small and lightweight, it was meant for close-quarter combat. In her hands, she’d kill with it.

She jerked her chin at Akiem. “The dragon dead?”

“No, actually.” Akiem opened his eyes. “Though I’m in no condition to stop you, should you wish me to be.”

Talking shit like that riled Zane’s protective instincts. “I’ll stop you.” He staggered to his feet and offered up empty hands. “We’re not here to hurt anyone. We’re both wounded, hungry, and cold.”

“You come from Bayston?” She narrowed her eyes. “We heard the city is burning.”

“Yes and yes.”

She eyed Akiem a few moments more, weighing the risks, and then lowered her bow. “You hurt bad, dragon? Can you walk?”

“If I must.”

She nodded. "Get up and follow me." She turned and plunged back into the brush. "Come. There are wolves nearby, and you both smell like easy meals."

Zane helped Akiem to his feet, more concerned than he let on when Akiem leaned heavily into him.

"This elf is more like those from my home..." Akiem said.

"More honorable?" Zane asked.

"More likely to kill me."

Zane mustered a smile. "Maybe it's time I protected you for once, eh?"



ZANE HAD HEARD of the settlement, not by name but by their eccentric practices. Electric lights were strung from poles along a winding central village street. Old human ruins had been patched up using debris from the old world. Windows glowed with electric light. He'd ask how they harvested electricity once he'd rested up, but for now, he admired the light as the scout led them into a house. She flicked a switch on the wall and a central light lit up the entire room.

"Dragon, get on the bed."

Akiem had barely settled on the bed before she approached with gauze, bandages, and a needle and thread. He eyed her as though she were approaching with a blade. "If I shift, any efforts to stitch me will dissolve."

"Don't shift then." Setting the implements down on the bedside table, she assessed her patient. "Do you want to remove your shirt, or shall I?"

Akiem grunted, peeled off his shirt, and tossed it aside. The pair glared at each other, and Zane, from his position propped against the wall, caught a touch of heat in the scout's cheeks. She was checking him out. Unexpected jealousy stoked the possessiveness Zane hadn't known he harbored.

"He's bleeding again," he said flatly, breaking their shared glare.

"Lie back," she ordered.

Akiem arched a brow at her tone and deferred to Zane. Zane nodded. If she was going to hurt either of them, she'd have done it by now.

She worked quickly, her hands light and fast as she cleaned the wound and stitched it up. It must have hurt, but Akiem didn't protest or flinch. He

stared at the ceiling, going wherever he went in that complicated head of his.

If she got to check him out, then so did Zane. He still hadn't seen enough of him naked, and it was the scars that drew Zane's eye. Dozens of them. Most on his arms. Some small nicks and others deeper. They were too uniform to be the result of an accident. Someone had methodically cut him—or he'd cut himself.

Fuck. The surface scars were a fraction of the wounds he'd been dealt. The dragon way was harsh. They routinely fought, but this was different. He'd been systematically tortured *for years*—maybe his entire life.

"Let me check that head wound of yours," the scout said to Zane.

He'd been so lost in thought, staring at Akiem's now-sleeping form, that he hadn't noticed her approach. "I'm fine," he grumbled.

She sighed like she'd heard the same a thousand times. "If the big bad dragon can let me stitch his side, you can let me take a look at your head. Sit."

He sat and leaned forward. Her fingers gently probed through his hair, around the bruise.

"I know you," she said. "You came by my old village a few years ago. Left some controversy behind, if I remember correctly?"

"What was the place called?"

"Oldport."

He swallowed. "Never heard of it."

"No? A guy by your description shackled up with one of the gang leaders for a while. Didn't last, though. You—or he—left, taking a shit ton of coin with him. That wasn't you?"

"Must have been someone else."

"You'll live," she declared, backing up and wiping her hands clean on a cloth. She scrutinized him some more, her attention roaming over his face and landing on his hand.

Zane looked down at the tattoo on his finger. He curled his fingers, hiding it.

"The stove's alight, there's hot water, and I'll get you both some fresh clothes. When you're ready, you can join us for breakfast."

Zane lifted his head. She tidied away the bloody pads, moving about the place as though she knew it well.

"What's your name?" he asked.

“Suzanne, but most everyone calls me Annie. You’re Zane, from Oldport. The tattoo...” she said, reading his shock at hearing his name. “Your friend’s called...?” She nodded at the sleeping dragon.

“His name’s Akiem.” Her hunter eyes sparkled at that, like she’d seen prey. “Why are you helping us?”

“Because of the haunted look about you, friend.” Finally, she smiled, and her prickly persona softened. “You’ve seen enough darkness. A little light goes a long way. And because he’s obviously the Black Prince everyone is talking about.”

She turned and left before Zane could ask how she knew the Black Prince. His gaze fell to Akiem again, like it always did now. He’d fallen asleep on his back, on top of the covers, shirtless. One arm hung carelessly off the bed while the other lay behind his head. Zane readily imagined being poised over him, about to enlighten the male on the pleasures denied him. He wanted to show him some goodness, some light, just like Annie had said. A life spent in darkness was no life at all.

Akiem’s countless scars were bright in the artificial light, thawing Zane’s rising lust and turning it into anger.

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CHAPTER 23



Akiem

THE LAST FEW days were broken into so many pieces that Akiem struggled to fit them together in his mind. Zane featured in them all. There was blood, and Clarion, and pain, and an elf with black and silver hair who'd spoken to him as though she were dragon. Her hands had been on his skin. Gentle hands. Light hands. And now he was in a strange house with its harsh, relentless electric light and old-world furniture, smelling of elf.

He woke feeling *light*. He'd dreamed of bad things, but it hadn't hurt. He hadn't woken trying to claw the marks off his arms. He hadn't found himself tucked into a corner, barely able to string three words together.

He knew war. The things he'd seen in the city didn't alarm him, only the things in his head wounded him, but even those appeared to have fled.

He tried to sit up. The wound screamed, making him gasp. Clarion had slashed his belly. He was lucky the lord hadn't disemboweled him. Lucky he'd gotten away. He'd fled with Zane in his claws, not knowing whether the elf was alive or dead. Impossibly, Clarion hadn't given chase.

He'd been afraid when he'd landed, exhausted and with his belly bleeding, but not for himself. He'd lain the elf down on the leaves as carefully as possible, freeing him from his claws, and waited, watching for any signs of life. Those moments... not knowing... they'd torn Akiem

open. What if the elf was dead and gone from this world? What was left for Akiem then?

Zane entered the house, a tray of food balanced on one hand and a cup in the other. He kicked the door closed behind him and set the food down on the end of the bed. His hair was damp, darkening it to a chestnut color. The clothes were fresh. He smelled of another elf.

An uncomfortable spike jabbed Akiem in the chest. He rubbed it. Could he be jealous of the other elf he smelled on Zane?

“You’re famous.” Zane grinned, perching himself on the foot of the bed. “Apparently, there’s a black dragon saving elves from the fires. Word spreads fast in these parts.”

He thought of the elf on the beach and her elfing. He’d saved them, but that hardly seemed like enough to warrant the awe.

“I see where your thoughts are going,” Zane said, circling a finger at Akiem. “That look that says you disagree. You can’t deny it. Your actions speak for you. You saved elves.”

Akiem tried to rake a hand through his hair, but it got snagged. He still smelled of fire and his own blood. “They would not idolize me if they knew my nature.”

Zane rolled his eyes and stood. “Eat. Clean yourself up. Nobody here wants to kill you. They’re all desperate to get a look at you, their dragon hero.”

Akiem’s frown dug deeper. “How far are we from the city?”

Zane’s smile faded. “A few days’ heavy trek. On the wing... maybe a day.”

“Then Clarion will come.”

“Just...” Zane puffed out a sigh. “Just rest, Akiem. You’ve earned it.”

Akiem tracked his path out the door and waited in the quiet, listening to his racing heart. He hadn’t earned this kindness. He did not deserve the food, although his stomach rumbled, overruling his head. He reached for the tray and froze. In the harsh electric light, his scars almost glowed. So many. Zane had seen. The female elf who’d fixed him up had seen too. They knew.

He looked at the door, then at the window where sunlight baked the closed drapes. He could leave. Just get up and go. He’d fled once, crossing an entire ocean to get away. What was west of here? More vicious dragons? Death? He’d ached for death before, but not so much now.

Leaving meant abandoning the elves. They'd all die if he did. Zane was right. The elves here had forgotten how to fight. They'd forgotten who they were, just like Akiem had. They needed to rediscover themselves, same as he. Maybe they could do so together.

After eating, he washed in the hot closet, dressed in more elven clothes—this time, they fit—and stared at the dragon looking back at him in the mirror. Tarnished eyes, straight hair, hard jaw and mouth, but it was the eyes that haunted him.

He sighed, looking away.

He'd seen the elves pin their hair back and, after finding pins in the dresser drawer, attempted to do the same. The clothes and hair didn't change him from being dragon, but it went a long way in remaking him into someone else, someone he was still trying to find.

"You look good."

The words stilled him. He hadn't heard Zane enter. Quickly resettling his thoughts, he straightened and leaned back against the dresser. Zane's gaze wandered over him. He found the scrutiny welcome, especially when Zane's ever-moving mouth pulled into that familiar little twitching smile.

"I've been thinking about what you said," Zane began, "about not being able to do anything alone..."

Akiem waited, watching Zane wrestle with his thoughts. He thought a lot, this one. More went on behind the shallow smiles and laughter.

"It will take more than me to inspire my kind to fight, more than impending war, even. Some people from Bayston came through here before us. They talked about the Black Prince."

Akiem dropped his gaze. His sense of unworthiness tried to sneak beneath his skin and undermine him.

Zane stepped forward. "I know you aren't who you were, but I think that's a good thing. Don't you?"

"You have no idea what you ask of me."

"I think I do." Another step. Zane held his gaze. His cheek fluttered. "You're stronger than you know."

Akiem let a smile lift the corner of his mouth. "That's not the problem."

"Then what is? Tell me," Zane pressed. "Help me understand, because I think you're wrong about yourself. At every turn, you've done the right thing, more so than the rest of us."

"I hurt your friend."

“Jevan’s an ass. I’ve lost count of the times I’ve wanted to kill him.”

“I... I’ve tortured your kind.”

“In the past. Considering what I’ve heard of the English elves, I’m sure they’d have done the same to you.”

“That is... true.” He had to admit that. It had been survival. War.

Zane was closer now and looking at him as though waiting for Akiem to speak the real truth. Of course, there really only was one truth about Akiem. “I’m dragon.”

Zane shrugged. “And?”

Akiem pushed off the dresser and closed the final few strides between them, holding Zane’s defiant glare. Zane was determined to find good in him, but it didn’t work like that. Not everything had good in it, not everything should be saved. “I’m not the hero your people are looking for.”

“Your actions say differently,” he replied, so full of himself, like he knew everything, every last surprise Akiem could throw at him. The elf’s eyes were full of hope, and that was part of what made Zane so impossible. What did he hope to get from Akiem exactly? “I’m broken inside. I’ve been broken inside my whole life. You cannot fix me. What I am, it’s blood deep.”

“Have you heard nothing I’ve said? I don’t hate you.” Zane frowned and flung a hand at the closed drapes. “They don’t hate you.”

Zane reached up, but Akiem caught his wrist, holding him back, making the grip tight enough for Zane to frown. “I am not some savior you can all pin your hopes on.”

He shoved past him and headed for the door. Let the people outside see him if that was what they truly wanted. See the dragon that would inevitably fail them, like he’d failed at everything else.

“Why do you hate yourself so much?”

The question yanked Akiem to a halt. He lifted his head and turned to find Zane waiting, arms crossed, hip cocked, the picture of cocky defiance. He was so damn sure he knew it all. Fine, then he could really know the ugly truth. Maybe then Zane would leave, and this ridiculous relationship would turn to ash, like it should.

“What color are my eyes?” Akiem asked.

He frowned. “Gold.”

“Look again.”

He ventured closer, bringing them almost toe to toe, and peered into Akiem's eyes. Akiem blinked, the elf's proximity crackling over his skin. Lust, desire, want, and, gods, so much more.

"What am I looking for? I see gold and flecks of darkness, the same color as your scales."

"It's not gold you see. Gold shines."

Confusion pulled his smile out of line. "What difference does the color of your eyes make?"

"I'm amethyst, like my mother, the queen of the land I come from. I'm amethyst—my fire proves it." A tremor undermined his voice, but it was too late; he'd started to reveal his fears, and now he had to spill them all. "It's what I told my mother, over and over. She'd lock me away, and I'd say the words over and over against the closed door, knowing she heard, but she never believed me because of what she saw in my eyes. No other obsidian has eyes like mine. They betray the truth to all who care to see."

"I don't understand."

"One of the three first great metals, the beast who *fucked* me for weeks on end until I bled..." Gods, it hurt to say and tripped his voice. "Dokul is my father." Now that the truth was out, more tried to rush free. "It's not gold you see in my eyes. It's bronze. I'm a monster inside. It's always been there. Every time I look in the mirror, the truth stares back at me. I can't be your hero. I can't save your people because of his poison. I'm not good, Zane. No matter how many lives I save, I'll never be good. Inside, there's a need—a desperate desire to destroy everything I touch. Metals are the worst of us, and it's inside of me. *He's* inside of me every day. I can't cut him out." He thrust out his arms and pulled up the sleeves, exposing the cuts. "I've tried, Gods, I've tried. I can't escape it. That's *why* I hate myself."

He'd said it, the terrible truth. His mother was dead, and despite his efforts to make her care for him, she never had, because of Akiem's father, because of the bronze in his eyes and veins. Whether Dokul and Mother's union had been an agreeable one or forced, didn't matter. When the clutch of eggs came, she'd destroyed all but one. She'd kept that single egg for years, until raising another clutch—all amethyst this time. All but Akiem, the secret, the rot, the bad apple. *Stupid dragon*. She'd told him once she'd wanted strength, not sniveling weakness. He'd tried to find that strength she sought, but had failed every single time. Nobody else had known. Dokul had never spoken of it, never once mentioned the bronze in his eyes,

although he must have suspected. The bronze chief hadn't wanted jeweled weakness in his brood, the same as Mother didn't want the bronze brutality in hers. And now Zane knew. Now he'd hate him too, because there was nothing to love about the bronze, and there was nothing to love about Akiem.

Zane searched his eyes, standing so close that Akiem had to stop himself from grabbing the elf and shaking sense into him.

"I don't care that you're dragon," Zane said. "I don't care what color your eyes are. None of that makes you you."

He didn't understand, no elf could. "You should care. You haven't seen the metals. You don't know. You think Luceran is the worst of us? Compared to Dokul, he's nothing more than a kit playing in ashes. Dokul would pin him down and bite his scales off, one by one, and that would just be the beginning."

Zane's scowl darkened. "You're afraid you're like him?"

A knot in Akiem's throat blocked the reply. The rage, the lust, the madness threatening to consume him. *I am like him.*

"How can I make you see you're not?"

"You can't," he croaked.

Zane pushed in, chest to chest, and looked up. "You think you'll turn on us. You're afraid you'll hurt me?"

Gods, this feeling that racked him every time he was around Zane ate him up inside, made him want things, made him lust so hard he feared he *would* hurt him. "Dokul destroyed me in every way. I do not trust who I am."

"I know..." Zane whispered, his mouth so close the words brushed across Akiem's lips.

"I'm afraid I'll do the same to you." He spoke so softly he might not have spoken at all.

"You won't."

Zane didn't know. He couldn't. Akiem had hurt others, tortured those of his brood, even his so-called brother—because he was bronze. The metal ran through his veins, made him vicious, made him lustful and rough, made him all the things he despised.

The door opened. Akiem stepped back and whirled away, reaching the cup of water on the dresser, for anything to create space between him and Zane and the disgusting truth.

“Oh, I... Akiem, would you like to join us for lunch?” Annie asked.

“No.” He sighed and flicked his gaze up, catching Annie’s glowering reflection. She wouldn’t ask if she truly knew him. None here would.

“We’re working out some... personal issues,” Zane explained. “Thank you.”

“I see. I’ll let you work on your... personal issues some more then.” She backed out the door and closed it neatly behind her.

Zane sighed. “Akiem, you’re...” Maybe he finally understood, because his argument died on his lips. “About us—”

“There is no us.” Akiem snapped. He pressed his fingers into the dresser top and kept his head down. When would he listen? “What we did was a transaction, nothing more.” It was *everything more*, but for both their sakes, he couldn’t allow himself to feel that way. “I paid you to fuck me. It’s done.”

“All right,” Zane conceded. “If that’s truly what you want.”

“It is.” Akiem drew in a sharp breath, one Zane didn’t see or hear.

“Then you won’t help us?”

He shouldn’t even be asking. “I’m not a leader, and I’m not your savior.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I will help you, where I can, but I’m no leader, not... anymore.”

The sound of the door closing signaled Zane’s departure and Akiem’s relief.

Akiem’s reflection mocked him. He looked into the eyes of the male he despised, saw the old scars on his arms, reminders of the days he’d rocked in the dank cell, trying to claw the metal from his veins so Mother would see him, and he wondered when the torment would end.



IF HE’D STAYED ANY LONGER in the elven house, he’d have shifted out of his skin. Wandering about the village wasn’t as bad as he’d feared. Villagers threw a few glances his way, but the elves carried on around him, as though a dragon among their number was no more noteworthy than a traveler passing through. Like at the city docks, he enjoyed their company, because they ignored him.

He drifted through the shadows cast by the low evening light and watched their ingenious electricity flicker on. Zane was among them, and he'd drawn quite the crowd. Akiem pulled back and watched, out of sight, as Zane made his audience laugh. He talked with animated movements, always smiling, his eyes bright with mirth, and those who joined in seemed equally relaxed in his presence. He naturally drew people to him, like a flame others gathered around.

Akiem had done the right thing. Seeing him here, now, thriving among his kind, proved his decision to shut down their relationship had been right. Zane deserved an elf like him, someone who could make him smile like that every day. Still, tucked into the shadows, Akiem admired his Red. Zane laughed at something one of his companions said, and the need inside his chest spiked again, hurting. He wanted him in every way, in dangerous ways, but it could never be. One mistake, that's all it would take, and he'd ruin his Red.

A dragon call pierced the revelry.

Distant.

Akiem looked up.

The call came again. Zane stilled. His gaze shot straight to Akiem, seeing through the darkness in which he'd been hiding.

"Turn off the lights!" Akiem ran for the cleared area they'd walked through on their way into the village. The shift poured through him moments after he'd passed the last house, opening up the wound in his belly. He mentally shoved the pain aside, flung open his wings, and beat the air, lifting himself above the trees. He needed to turn the dragon around before it saw the village lights.

Rain kissed his scales and drenched his back, weighing down his wings and trailing water from their tips. There was no sunset and no moonlight, just clouds and wetness and the arched outline of an oncoming dragon. Not Clarion. Another obsidian, like Akiem.

Akiem snarled and stoked the fire low in his throat, making himself glow against the dark sky. He wanted the dragon to give chase and never know it had almost stumbled upon an elven village.

A warning screech reached him. The dragon had seen him.

Akiem banked left, his back and wings aching under the relentless pressure. He beat harder, climbing higher, breathing heavily, feeding blood and oxygen to his heart, driving ever forward.

Away. He just had to draw the dragon away. Whatever happened after was up to fate.

He dropped his head, searching below for the obsidian, but the beast melted into the darkness. It was here, though.

He soared, wings riding the air, and listened. His heart thumped too loudly. Rain hissed against his scales. There—above to the left and coming in fast. Akiem tucked his wings in and rolled. The obsidian overshot his downward lunge, screamed in fury, and reeled mid-flight. Akiem was above him now. He let loose the boiling purple flame, sizzling the murk and clouds away and scorching a line down the dragon's nearside wing. It shrieked and pulled up, catching the air like a kite and stalling. Then it twisted back and dove.

Akiem folded his wings in and dove too, giving chase. He used the weight of his tail to flick himself on course and overshoot the obsidian. The ground, with its rolling blanket of trees, each one like spikes, rushed up. Akiem was slimmer than this obsidian and faster. Down it flew, and down Akiem plunged after it, his veins hot, his heart ablaze. Yes, this was living. This was freedom.

The obsidian pulled up.

Too late.

Akiem flung out his wings and threw out his claws. He caught the beast along its back, hooking in and wrenching it out of its flight path. It screamed and swung its head back to unleash the flame. Akiem grinned, revealing rows of teeth, and drove the dragon into the tree line, holding it down as the timber raked the beast's belly. Momentum plowed them forward. The wind beneath his wings pulled Akiem level. Trees snapped. Timber splintered. He smelled dragon blood and felt the beast in his claws fall limp.

He wanted to scream at the world, wanted more blood, more dragons to sink his teeth into, more death.

He tossed the dead dragon into the trees, wiping out a swathe of forest. Akiem landed in the fresh clearing and crowded his kill, spreading his wings wide to claim it. He didn't care who it was. A male, he saw now. Didn't care he had once had a life. This territory was now Akiem's, now the Black Prince's. He sank his teeth into the beast's throat and tore it out, then gorged on the torn entrails.

A twig snapped.

Akiem brought his head around toward the sound and saw Zane among the trees, breathless atop a white horse.

Prey.

Akiem prowled forward, snarl burbling.

Prey.

Zane's horse shied.

Akiem shook his head, wincing around another urge, a very different one. *Protect.*

The conflict tore through him, two desires ripping him apart. The shift imploded, packing everything dragon back beneath the tight confines of human skin. "*Get rid of the damn horse!*"

Zane dismounted and whacked the beast in the hindquarters. "Yarh!" It squealed and darted back into the forest.

Akiem's vision blurred, the shift still settling, dragon still trying to pour out of him all over again. *Prey.*

Zane smelled of horse.

A horse that had just fled.

Chase. Chase. Chase.

"Akiem?"

His name.

That was good.

"Say it again, elf." There was too much dragon in his words, his body full of rage and hunger and want, his wound forgotten.

The elf wasn't afraid, the fool.

Zane spread his hands. "Akiem." He smiled and kept on walking closer.

Akiem panted through his nose.

"They saw you. They saw what you did. You saved the village."

He was done with stupid human words. Akiem had Zane's face in his hands in the next moment, and then his mouth on his, *owning, taking*. Zane tried to push back, and that made it worse. His growl claimed them both, and Zane shuddered like he wanted this. Akiem dragged his nails down Zane's shirt and clenched the fabric while driving the elf against a tree. The sudden stop pressed *elf* into Akiem. He tore from Zane's mouth and dragged his teeth over the pulsing softness of his neck. He was raging hard, a fact Zane's hand had found. Trapped somewhere between dragon and man, Akiem pulled the elf's shirt apart, popping buttons, and tasted the smooth warmth of his shoulder. He moved down over his collarbone to a

pert nipple. His teeth ached with the urge to bite. He thrust his cock into Zane's hand instead to distract his wild mind.

If Zane said no, he wouldn't listen.

Akiem clutched the elf by the hair and held him back, his throat exposed, his body pinned beneath his. "I can't..."

I can't stop. I can't do this. I can't hurt you. I can't be who you want me to be.

"Do it."

He didn't know what he asked of him!

There were more growls than words now. Zane's fingers pulled on the laces of his pants, loosening them. He breathed fast, and when Akiem dropped his hand to Zane's crotch, he found the elf equally hard and wanting.

Zane clutched Akiem's face and bared his teeth. "Fuck me, dragon, like you've wanted to since we met." His eyes blazed ocean green. Need burned where humor had glittered before.

Akiem couldn't stop this.

Nothing in him was strong enough to stop it.

He clutched Zane's hips, near madness. There were too many layers of clothing between them. Akiem was considering ripping them off, when Zane made quick work of the ties of his pants, grabbed Akiem's hands, and plunged them into the back of his pants, forcing his hands to ride over his ass. Zane gasped close to Akiem's ear. He was a writhing, hot, muscular thing made of desire, and Akiem was losing his fucking mind to him.

Zane faced the tree and thrust his ass against Akiem's crotch, rubbing against the part of him that strained and beat as though filled with its own dragon fire. Akiem needed it quenched.

Zane planted a vial of liquid in his hand. Somewhere in all the raging chaos, Akiem understood what he asked and pooled the oil in his hand. Then he slid a finger down Zane's crevice and eased it inside the puckered, heated hole.

"Deeper."

The elf's groans plucked on Akiem's nerves, the ones that lined up directly with his cock. He sank a finger deeper, and Zane arched.

"Fuck me. Now. Dragon."

Akiem stroked the oil over himself, widened Zane's hole with two fingers, then probed closer, testing. Something inside Akiem snapped.

Control, maybe. He gripped Zane's shoulder, clasped himself tighter, and Zane shoved back, lifting his ass. Akiem thrust in, losing himself to the feel of elf. There was no going slow. He pushed down on Zane's lower back, seeking the right angle to penetrate and thrust. Zane gasped, swore, and groaned an elven word Akiem had no hope of understanding. Again, pleasure trilled. Again, he was falling, losing himself and finding himself all at once. He thrust harder, deeper, finding a maddening rhythm that chased the fine line between pleasure and pain, making it pull tighter and tighter. Zane flung a wicked look over his shoulder, and Akiem came undone. He spilled his seed and growled out his claim.

Zane tried to move, but Akiem reached around and found his hardness. Akiem pulled Zane up. Zane's back met Akiem's chest, and still inside him, he rolled his thumb and palm over Zane's erection. The elf bucked and twitched. Zane's breath hastened, his heart too. Akiem heard it all, strumming Zane's pleasure higher until he too broke open. His beautiful mouth spilled curses while his cock spilled his seed.

Akiem gently bit his shoulder, and when Zane turned his head, he kissed him, slow and messily. Zane turned in his arms. The kiss deepened and became real now that Akiem saw the shimmer in Zane's eyes.

"You're a bullshit liar, Black Prince." Zane nipped at Akiem's mouth, then his chin, and purred, "There absolutely is an *us*."

He could hardly deny it, though much of him wanted to. No coin had changed hands. This was all Akiem, all dragon, and by the gods, he wanted—*needed* the elf in every way, and that was fucking terrifying.

"Don't you dare shut down on me." Zane held Akiem's face and forced him to look, to see. "You didn't hurt me. There is no shame in this. Do you hear me, Akiem? You did nothing wrong. In fact..." He grinned. His grip softened, and his thumb stroked Akiem's cheek. "You did everything right." The kiss was all teasing, nearly touching lips and tongues, and a promise of more. "You save elves now."

"I guess I do," he grumbled back. One elf in particular. He slid his hands down Zane's back, marveling at the sensation of *male* and how good he felt beneath his touch and how right this all was. *Zane was right*. He didn't feel shame, not with him. He felt free.

"As much as I'd love to stay here, the dead dragon will attract wolves ..."

He reluctantly withdrew and heard Zane sigh the same regret that pained Akiem inside. The carcass drew Akiem's eye; its glistening insides spilled across upturned trees. Gods, Akiem had forgotten the carcass and the vicious killing need that had driven him to own Zane. He laced up his pants and watched Zane do the same. Something like an apology stuck in his throat. Zane had said he was fine, but Akiem had been blind with lust. He'd been rough. He must have hurt him.

Zane's hand slipped into Akiem's and squeezed. "C'mon, tall, dark, and deadly. You frightened my horse, so now we walk."

"Good. I do not ride my food."

"Are you sure about that?" The look he tossed Akiem scorched his soul and made his cock harden all over again.

Zane looped an arm through his, startling Akiem with its familiarity, but within a few steps, he found the closeness comforting. He'd never had anyone just walk with him before. Those who had gotten close in the past had always wanted something in return, had always *taken* pieces of him until there had been nothing left. Zane only gave, and Akiem's hollow heart swelled.

Elves were... fascinating, heartwarming, honest—mostly—and kind. All things dragons were not. He hadn't cared to know them before. Now it seemed he cared too much, perhaps even *loved*.

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CHAPTER 24



Zane

HIS BODY THROBBED in all the right ways, and while there were more important things going on around them, Zane had a hard time thinking around the dragon that had fallen into step beside him. They entered the village from the side and slunk into their borrowed house unnoticed. Akiem went straight for the shower, and Zane watched him go, thinking about following. Alumn, he couldn't get enough of the paradox that was the Black Prince. Vicious and deadly on one hand, protective and vulnerable on the other.

The shower hissed on. The door was closed. Akiem hadn't invited him inside, but he didn't know *how* to invite him inside.

Zane planted his hands on his hips. That fuck against the tree should've sated him. His body couldn't take another round, but his mind wasn't done with the dragon, not by a long shot.

After Akiem had dashed out of the village, shifting in full view of the startled elves, Zane had climbed to the rooftops along with the others and watched the two black beasts tear strips off each other, lit by Akiem's purple fire. He'd never seen anything so devastatingly beautiful, and when the dragons had come down, he'd taken a horse and galloped out to find him, fearing he'd vanish and never return. He needn't have worried, and now every elf here knew Akiem protected them.

It was insane and impossible, but that was Akiem. Dragons didn't care for elves. They ate them. Akiem *cared*.

Zane knocked on the shower door, staring at the pile of clothes dropped outside it. He'd have thrown the door open and stepped inside with anyone else, but Akiem was just as likely to shove him through a wall if startled.

The door opened. Akiem reached out, grabbed Zane's shirt, and pulled him inside the shower filled with steam and dragon. Bronze eyes glowed in the mist. Zane's breath caught. And then Akiem's mouth slammed into his. He was all hardness and strength, but somehow also soft and precious. Water soaked Zane's clothes through in seconds, weighing him down. He didn't care. The kiss breathlessly shattered. Akiem boxed him in, arms braced on either side of him against the wall. Water poured down his face, painting his black hair over his shoulders and down his chest. The wound low at his hip had scabbed over, but it still looked raw enough to bother most people. But Akiem wasn't most people. He knew pain better than he should.

Zane followed the half-lifted rise of his lips and the shimmer of dragonsight in his eyes. He didn't look real, or maybe he was too real and Zane's mind couldn't grasp what he'd captured.

"You're so fucking beautiful..." He touched Akiem's face, tracing the hard line of his jaw.

Akiem's lashes fluttered down. He didn't believe the words. Zane's heart ached for his wounded dragon. He'd make him see the beauty inside him if it took an elven lifetime.

"I'm sorry," Akiem whispered.

Alumn, he had nothing to be sorry for. Zane cupped his face and ducked his head, seeking Akiem's shying eyes. "You have done nothing wrong."

"I don't understand what this is... what we are..." He spoke so softly, his voice broken by tremors.

"Let me show you."

Zane kissed his jaw and ran his tongue along its edge, teasing the dragon awake all over again. He needed to taste all of him, *feel* all of him. Zane dropped his hands to Akiem's chest, mapping every ripple of muscle and relishing his strength. To know he had a dragon's heart pumping for him, his body alight beneath his hands, was a power trip Zane desperately needed more of. More than that, he wished Akiem could see himself the way Zane saw him.

Akiem's hot mouth was at Zane's throat, his tongue circling, teeth nipping. It was too much and not enough. Zane pulled him closer and hooked a leg around his, feeling every inch of Akiem grind against his hip.

Akiem's mouth traced the corner of Zane's, his tongue probing, but as Zane went to answer it, Akiem pulled back, teasing or still unsure. Fuck. And Akiem thought he couldn't do this. If he were anyone else, Zane would have grabbed him, flung him against the wall, and owned him, mouth and hands and cock, but not Akiem. He needed this gentleness and to be in control. Zane had always known it instinctively, but now knew why. If Zane ever met the bronze who broke his dragon, he'd rip his fucking heart out and pin it to a tree.

The shower ran cold, but Akiem radiated heat, and Zane lost himself in his dragon—Akiem's touches so achingly gentle and reverent, so different from before—until he no longer knew where he ended and Akiem began.

Akiem shut off the water, lifted Zane under the thighs, found the bed, and lowered him down. His eyes blazed their possessiveness, and Zane blinked half-lidded eyes back. There was nothing to be said, no words that could make this more perfect. Zane vowed to keep Akiem's dragonheart safe, whatever their futures held.



MUCH OF THE village was going about their morning tasks when Zane found Annie stringing a bow at a table outside a dwelling.

She arched a brow, which Zane translated as, she knew exactly why he and Akiem hadn't made an appearance since the dragon saved the village. He wasn't sure what the elves here thought of a dragon and elf relationship—if what he had with Akiem was a relationship. He hoped it was.

"And how is our grumpy dragon this morning?" Annie asked.

He couldn't help but smile. "He's lurking somewhere, watching the sky."

"How did you snare him?"

The personal question caught Zane off guard. "It's a long story." And not one he wanted to share with her.

"Seems like an unlikely pairing, is all."

Whatever he had with Akiem was between him and Akiem. “I wanted to speak with your elder about what we can do for you.”

“Don’t got one.” She shrugged. “We govern ourselves in this little corner of the world. Anyone who doesn’t like it can move right along.” She tested the bow by pulling back on the string, making the wooden limbs groan. “What is it you think you can do for us, Zane?”

The way she said his name and glanced at the tattoo on his finger reminded him of the accusations he’d left behind in Oldport. “Okay, look... you heard some things about me in Oldport. The situation there was unusual. Much of it was personal. I left. It’s over. Can we move on?”

“Sure.” She beamed. “You moved right on to dragon from your ‘personal issues.’”

Zane pinched his mouth closed and sighed through his nose. “Is that a problem?”

Was Akiem the problem here or Zane’s past?

She waved the comment away. “Ignore me. I haven’t slept. Refugees are still passing through. Dragons circling. It’s a lot to take in.”

It was, and they’d all seen horrors these past few days. Zane’s nerves were more rattled than he was used to. “This place is close to Bayston. The dragonkin will come eventually. Akiem can deter them for a while, but you’ll need to move farther out.”

She tutted. “Can’t do that.”

“Part of the old world were rediscovered underground during the war. You’d be hidden from dragons.”

She turned her bow over in her hands, admiring her work. “Yeah, no. That doesn’t work for me and probably won’t for the rest of the people here.”

Then they’d all die, but Annie didn’t seem concerned. She hadn’t seen people burned alive in the streets or tasted their ashes on her lips, but if she stayed, she would. “I saw Bayston fall, and before that, I fought against dragons in the westland. There’s no use in repeating the mistakes of the past. Perhaps we can stand against dragons in the future, but not now.”

“Can’t we?” She set the bow on the table and focused all her attention on Zane. “Do you think Alumn brought you and the Black Prince here, Zane?”

“I don’t know...” he answered honestly. He’d tried not to think too long on what any of this meant.

She nodded. "I'll show you why we're not going anywhere."

He followed her out of the village, along a well-worn trail to a metal hatch in the ground. Sweeping aside fallen leaves, Annie heaved the hatch open and descended down a long set of steps. Electric lights flicked on, illuminating her way. As Zane followed, electric lights buzzed overhead. "Where do you source your electricity?"

"We have a solar farm nearby."

Impressive.

"Before my time, the village had a few humans among them. They knew how to wire up the solar cells to a converter and taught electricity to the residents, until the dragons rounded them up and killed them."

Zane reached the final step and stared into a vast, hollow darkness. Annie flicked a switch on the wall. Light flooded into a massive windowless warehouse.

"That clearing you arrived through... this bunker is beneath it," Annie began, moving into the space, shrinking with every step. "We keep it camouflaged, for obvious reasons."

Small boxes lining the wall blinked red lights. They were placed at intervals around the entire subterranean building. "And those are?"

"Wired explosives." Her words echoed.

Zane looked again at the blinking boxes. There had to be fifty of them, all set and ready to blow.

Annie stopped, placed a hand on her hip, and sent her gaze far down the building. "We think it was an aircraft hangar. This whole area was laid with asphalt, like maybe it was meant for their winged machines. I cleared it last summer and wired it with a stash of what the humans called C4. I think it'll work."

"What will work?"

"Your dragon can lure the new king here."

"And then what?"

"Boom." She grinned.

"What about Akiem?" Akiem wasn't bait for the enemy.

She reappraised him, the manner not entirely friendly. "You're protective of him?"

Alumn, his breath hitched. Yes, he was fucking protective of Akiem because of that predatory look in her eye. "He's been used enough."

“And you wouldn’t use him to help destroy Lord Clarion? Zane, who steals from his lovers? Who leaves wreckage wherever he goes? You really wouldn’t use a dragon who’s fallen into your lap?”

Zane laughed dryly. All right, so this was personal. She knew a whole lot more about Oldport than rumors alone could account for. “Who close to you did I screw over in Oldport, huh?”

“The elf you stole from was my brother.”

Ah.

“You broke his heart.”

And he fucking broke mine. He let his smile linger, wearing it like armor. The male he’d left in her village was one of the reasons he’d sworn off having multiple sexual encounters with the same person. He’d happily warmed her brother’s bed for a few weeks, gotten too close, and thought maybe it was more than a passing fancy. Zane had even told Jevan he was putting down roots. But love was blind, and so was Zane, back then. Annie’s brother was an asshole; he’d just hidden it well. He ran the Oldport gangs. It had been thrilling at first, until her brother had gotten heavy-handed and abusive. “Your brother’s misplaced love is hardly my fault.”

“You left without a word *and* stole his coin. You’ve got a chance here to do something right, and all it’ll cost you is a dragon.”

A dragon Zane cared a great deal about. Annie thought she knew him, thought she knew what had happened in Oldport too, but she was wrong on both counts. “What are you suggesting here?”

“We lure Clarion right inside and I press the trigger. No more king.”

“An ambush.” Zane narrowed his eyes. “And Akiem? What happens to him?”

“He can look out for himself.”

That wasn’t an answer. “You don’t give a shit about him, do you?”

“He’s dragon... How many of us has he killed?” She approached and looked Zane deep in his eyes. “You don’t think he genuinely cares for you, do you?” Her laughter was sharper than Zane’s and heartless. “You do! The infamous Red Devil Zane has fallen into his own trap *with a dragon!*”

Zane might have had a come-back, but her words hurt too much to summon some wit.

“He’s dragon. Do you think you’ll live happily ever after like in those old human stories?” She laughed harder, knotting Zane’s insides.

He hadn't thought much beyond tomorrow, but a small part of him had looked farther ahead in search of a place for them. It sounded ludicrous, but he'd hoped, and Annie was laughing all over that small glimmer of hope, snuffing it out.

She patted him on the shoulder. "Oh, lover," she sighed. "Selfish, shallow males like you don't get happy endings."

He shoved her hand off. "Your brother was no saint. I did what I did to survive. You don't know me, and you don't know Akiem. He'll help you if you ask, because he's a better man than me. He won't even care that you don't give a shit what happens to him. He'd expect nothing less. But I won't allow you to use him."

Her smile was full of pity. "It's not your choice, though, is it?"

Akiem had found a purpose. He'd save elves, even if it killed him, and that's what Jevan had meant all those nights ago when Akiem had saved him and faced Luceran right after. Akiem's purpose was to take as many dragons down *with him*, because he believed he deserved death.

Zane left Annie in the hangar, retracing their steps up the stairs and out. It might be Akiem's choice, but Zane wouldn't stand by and let him throw his life away. He deserved so much more. Akiem didn't see it, but he would. He just needed time to understand who he was—time Zane wanted to give him.

He headed toward the village perimeter, seeking his dragon before Annie found him first.

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CHAPTER 25



Akiem

HE HAD FULLY INTENDED to walk the village outskirts, checking for signs of dragons, but he'd stumbled on an elven school and inexplicably couldn't tear himself away. The little elves listened attentively to their tutor. She talked of dragons and the war the humans hadn't survived. Akiem listened. As an outsider, this war was different from the one he'd fled half a world away. The elves here were different too. More gentle, like Zane's touch.

It didn't feel real.

The frantic need to own Zane after the kill hadn't been Akiem's finest moment, but afterward, in the rain closet, and after that between the sheets... Those times were a wonder. He hadn't known a male of any race could summon in him such wonderful sensations. Love, such a strange concept. He'd never experienced it. He'd thought he had, with his broodsister, in his devotion to Mother and beneath Luceran's controlling hand, but he'd been so very wrong. Love wasn't being owned. There was no submission. No fear. No power play. He and Zane were equal, a fact he'd have denied to his death not so long ago. Zane had shown him another way of life, and Akiem wanted so much more. For the first time in months, he wanted to live this new life, perhaps alongside Zane, if the elf would have him. Zane was too kind, too gentle, and Akiem did not deserve him, but maybe one day he would.

Luceran stepped from the shadows behind the tutor.

The sight of the diamond king was so sudden and unexpected that Akiem's heart seized. No, it wasn't possible. He blinked. Still there. The king glistened beneath sunlight like a glorious work of human art.

But he was dead. Akiem had carried him back to the compound himself.

The little elflings whimpered.

A wicked smile lifted the king's thin mouth.

This was no hallucination.

Akiem bolted down the center of the class, his only thought on blocking Luceran.

The elven tutor saw Akiem rush her, and like all good elves, she'd do anything to protect her little ones. A dagger flashed, drawn from inside her sleeve. Akiem veered, avoiding the slash, but the distraction gave Luceran an opening. The king stepped around the unsuspecting tutor. He tore the dagger from her hand and drew a bloody line across her throat.

Tiny, horrified screams erupted around Akiem.

No. No!

The tutor fell to her knees, hands clutching Akiem's legs. She hadn't seen the king and still didn't know he stood behind her, watching her die, a blank look on his face.

Other elves would come in seconds. Luceran was alive. He'd killed this female. Nothing about this made sense.

"Why?" Akiem asked.

"You do not belong to elves, my black prince."

How was the next question, but it died on Akiem's lips when Luceran stepped forward and stroked a finger down Akiem's cheek. "They'll despise you for this," the king said.

This hadn't been Akiem's doing. He would never do this, not anymore. Before... before yes... he had killed elves. So many. So much blood. Memories tore at his mind.

"Leave!" Akiem hissed at the king.

Luceran offered his hand. "You are dragon and you are mine."

This was wrong. It was a trick. Luceran was dead. But if Luceran was dead, how was the tutor dead at Akiem's feet? Was any of this real? Had Akiem killed her? The king slotted the dagger into Akiem's hand and closed his fingers around it. "You're a killer, Akiem. Look what you've done."

The dagger burned in his grip, the feel of it shockingly real.

“Akiem!”

Zane’s shout whirled him around. He stood with others of his kind, holding them back. Zane saw the dagger too. This was real. His face fell.

He turned away from Zane, away from the pain. Luceran was not there. Akiem had a sickness inside him; the bronze in his veins made it so. Fragile thoughts cracked and then shattered. He didn’t know who he was. He’d thought he was good. He’d thought he was different, but this... this was who he’d been before. This was who he really was: the amethyst prince, a killer for a queen, vicious and ruthless. Dragon.

“Akiem... wait...”

Zane. Akiem had told him this would happen. He shouldn’t have gotten so close to the elf. Elves and dragons could not be together. This was the result. Always.

He had to find Luceran, to know the king was real, to know he wasn’t losing his mind.

“Akiem, don’t!”

He ran, darting between homes and into the brush. The king had to be here. He had to be real. If he wasn’t, then Akiem had killed the tutor, making him the monster he feared the most.

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CHAPTER 26



Zane

ZANE BOLTED after Akiem's dark outline, plunging into the brush a few strides behind him. Branches tore at his face and clothes. He had to get to him, to tell him they knew he hadn't killed the tutor before Zane lost him. He was losing him. He could feel it. There was something precious between them, but so very fragile, and it was about to break.

An arm shot out in front of him. Zane veered too late. Fingers snagged his hair and yanked. Zane's head snapped back, and pain tore down his neck. His back hit the ground, knocking the wind from his lungs. Clarion was on him, the dragon pinning Zane's wrists down. He growled, low and deadly.

Zane breathed hard through his teeth. He couldn't wrestle free—he'd tried that before—so he stayed still, guarding his strength for any slip in Clarion's grip or lapse in concentration. "Let me go."

Clarion leaned in, close enough to kiss, but the snarl on the lord's lips was not an invitation. "What a fabulous idea."

He pushed off Zane, climbed to his feet, and beckoned Zane to stand. Slowly Zane rolled onto his side and stood.

Clarion's pupils were so black they filled his eyes. "Run for me, elf."

Akiem was close, chasing after the ghost of Clarion's brother.

Going back to the village was out of the question. He couldn't lead Clarion to them. He *had* to run.

"How is Luceran alive?" Zane backed up a few paces, feeling his way on the leafy ground.

"Games, elf... It's all about the *chase*." His violet eyes blazed. "Run and run and run—"

Clarion lunged.

Zane smashed through the undergrowth in the direction he hoped Akiem had taken. He *could* outrun a dragon in this brush, unless Clarion shifted and sniffed him out. The lord wanted a chase, and Zane would give him one to remember.

Following the rise and fall of the terrain, so sure Akiem would be around the next tree or over the next mound, his heart pounded and his thighs burned, then the ground fell out from under him. Falling wasn't the worst of it. His knee struck first, sinking into a bed of thick mud. Zane plunged forward and threw out a hand, but the mud took that too, embracing him up to his shoulder in cold.

He floundered. Mud splashed into his mouth. Panic made his thoughts race.

Not mud... anything but mud.

He heard dragons circling all over again, so like before.

"Alumn, no..."

He had to find Akiem. He was here. He was close. He had to be. The mud sucked Zane down. With every pull, every twitch, the thick slop sucked him deeper into the cold, inch by painful inch. It was like before. He saw bodies in the mud, those drowned as they'd fled the battlefield. Reaching skeletal hands. Wide, mud-covered eyes, their faces forever locked in horror.

His lungs weren't working. His heart beat too hard, like it might burst out of his chest. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Clarion was here, chasing... Couldn't think about anything outside of the mud climbing up his waist, pressing against his chest, squeezing the life right out of him.

"*Help...*" he gasped. He clawed at the mud, trying to dig a path out, knowing, somewhere in the back of his mind, that it was better to stay still, but rational thought had fled.

Mud crept over his shoulders and up his neck. He snagged a branch, only for it to snap off and drop him deeper. Mud smothered his chin,

crawled higher into his mouth. He threw his head back, breathing hard through his nose. Alumn, not like this! It wasn't fair. Why save him in the past for him to die here...?

He sucked in air through his nose.

Mud poured over his eyes.

The thundering was inside, his body screaming, until the thundering of his heart swallowed him whole.

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CHAPTER 27



Akiem

HE'D GOTTEN TURNED AROUND, and now every inch of him demanded he shift and take to the air. He couldn't see in the thick forest, and Luceran's scent surrounded him. He had to shift and take to the sky to see from above.

A streak of white hit him like a lightning bolt. Luceran's fingers found his throat. Akiem slashed low with the stained dagger and caught the king, hearing him gasp. Akiem pulled back to drive the dagger in deep to keep him from shifting, but a root or a rock caught his foot and they tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

Luceran landed a punch to Akiem's gut, reopening the wound. He cried out and thrust an elbow around, striking the king in the jaw and throwing him off balance. Akiem shoved the knife forward. Luceran caught his wrist in both hands and jerked his head forward. Pain blasted across Akiem's nose. He swallowed and spat blood, recoiling.

Teeth fixed onto his throat.

Akiem froze, instinct overruling everything.

Don't move.

It'll be over quicker that way.

He can't do anything Dokul hasn't already done.

The pain would end.

It always ended.

Luceran's growls permeated the sound of Akiem's thudding heart.

Akiem thought of Zane, his half-cocked smile and hungry, illicit glances.

Luceran's teeth slid from his neck. The king knelt on Akiem's chest and prized the dagger from his loose grip. "Return with me and your elves will live another day."

Akiem blinked at the diamond king. The hollowness Zane had filled returned, emptying out all emotion. "You'll leave them alone?"

"I will."

"And Zane?"

Luceran's top lip curled. "He'll live, but you'll never see him again."

"But he's... safe?"

The king's lashes shuttered. He leaned forward, his face filling Akiem's vision, leaving no room for thoughts of another. "You're mine," he growled. "You were mine when I dragged you off that beach and you're still mine. Nothing and nobody escapes me. Did you think you had? Did you think you were free?"

He stroked his knuckles down Akiem's face. Akiem turned his face away. The king's growl rumbled. "I opened the door and you ran, my black prince. You were a beautiful chase, but the time has come for the game to end."

His icy touch burned into Akiem's cheek. "Your death was a lie. Why?"

The king slowly blinked his violet eyes, and the real dragon peered out from behind all the dazzling prettiness. A dragon at the top of the food chain. Cunning and manipulative. Jeweled to his core. He'd played Akiem since that day on the beach, playing with his mind and hidden desires. The strange words and stranger behavior, letting Akiem think he cared. It had all been lies. Akiem swallowed.

"You made the mistake of thinking my brother and I are different. We are one and the same. He is my eyes and ears, and I am his claws. He saw rebellion in you. I saw a game like no other."

"I had no intention of hurting you."

Luceran's smile was cutting. "You think I do not know a predator when I see one? You *were* a prince. I smell it on you. Your blood beats differently from other jeweled. You look through me, seeing where best to sink your teeth. You want my throne. You want destruction. *It's in your eyes.*"

Akiem breathed in and bared his teeth in warning. "You're more right than you can possibly understand."

"You're dangerous. You're a threat. The chase has proven it." He straightened, his weight still an uncomfortable pressure on Akiem's thighs, reminding him too much of past horrors. "But for all your potential, you are weak and broken. Return to my side and no more elves need die."

Bile burned the back of Akiem's throat. "You burned a city and killed elves... for a game?"

"It was time the elves remembered who controls them." Luceran freed Akiem and offered his hand. "Your chase was just entertainment."

The wound in his gut burned. Blood dribbled down his throat from his broken nose. He dabbed at it, thoughts reeling. If he left with Luceran, the elves would live, until the next game, the next test, and now Luceran knew Akiem had a weakness. Elves would always suffer while Akiem lived.

Akiem closed his hand around Luceran's. "My life is yours."

Menace made the king's smile flicker and almost snuff out. He strode past Akiem and shifted in a clearing, his bulk shining white beneath the sun. Akiem shifted and took to the sky behind the king, leaving behind his first love.

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CHAPTER 28



Zane

METAL CUFFS, locked around his wrists, were tied to chains looped in a hook bolted to the floor. Tugging at them did little, but he tried until the cuffs rubbed his skin raw.

Opposite him, similarly chained, two elven sisters huddled together, mutely eyeing him. Clarion's bitter scent covered them. Beyond them, a tall female leaned against the corner of the chamber, her eyes distant, seeing far-off things Zane didn't want to contemplate.

He had dreamed of dragon claws closing around him and lifting him from the mud, but the claws hadn't been Akiem's, and the dream had quickly turned into a nightmare. His situation hadn't improved much on waking. Thinking on it made him want to curl into himself like the others here already had.

He tugged again on the cuffs and pulled them close to examine each link for a weakness.

"You have red hair..." one of the twins said.

Zane looked up but had no idea which one had spoken.

"He was going to kill someone with red hair."

"Guess I have that to look forward to." He wedged his boots against the hook, clamped his hands around the chain near the joint, and heaved back

until every muscle in his back and arms burned. The damn loop didn't move.

Mud flaked off his boots. He looked at it, hating each flake and how it had made him panic. Jevan had saved him before. Was he here?

"Do you know Jevan?" he asked.

The twins blinked at him, but the female behind them jerked her head up.

"You know him?" he asked again.

She nodded and crawled forward, as far as her chains would allow. He waited for her to say how she knew Jev, but her eyes pleaded instead.

"He took her tongue," one of the twins said, the one with cropped black hair.

She said something else too, but Zane rocked back, needing the wall to hold him up. His head spun. The room tilted, trying to pull him down again. He breathed too hard, too fast. He should have taken the shot to kill Clarion when he'd had the fucking chance. All of this could have been avoided.

"Hey... what's your name?" the same twin asked.

He couldn't be here, and he definitely couldn't *die* here. He clutched his head. Fuck, he had to get to Akiem. The panic was back, cutting each breath off too soon. He and Akiem were going to make a difference together. That was the plan, not this prison. He couldn't die here.

"I'm Teone, and this is my sister, Helana."

"Zane," he said through his teeth, grateful for the girl's attempt to distract him.

Teone was the talkative one. The other girl, Helana, kept her head down. Her bangs covered her eyes.

"Do you know Jev?" he asked them.

Teone nodded and shuffled closer. "Yeah, he was here a little while." She jerked her chin at the closed door. "Clarion kept him in there, and then the dragon in black took him away. He's maybe... probably dead, I guess."

The black dragon was Akiem. Clarion had kept Jev in this very chamber. Maybe Akiem would come for Zane too? But no, Akiem should stay away. He'd gotten free of his past, of this place. Maybe he'd finally fly off and never come back. He should, but given Akiem's desire to get himself killed saving others, it wasn't likely.

Zane ached all over and inside too. He looked at the damp walls. No windows. He couldn't stay here. The lack of light would eat at his soul like

a cancer.

“Jev’s alive... I think,” he said. Although the last time he’d seen Jev, he’d been standing behind Clarion, watching the lord beat on Zane. “The black dragon saved him. That dragon is not what you think.”

“We’re talking about the same dragon? Real tall. Golden eyes. He looked mean—like, they’re all mean, but meaner than even Clarion.” She shuddered. “He saved him? For real?” Zane nodded, and her big eyes widened further. “But he’s dragon.”

Every time someone told him Akiem was dragon, it made him love him more. His big, beautiful black prince. Alumn, he had to get out of here and back to him before he did something typically Akiem.

Akiem had saved Jev, only for Jev to turn on them. Zane rested against the wall and stared at the door out of the prison, but his mind wandered back to how he’d seen Jevan standing behind Clarion, making no move to help. Jev had frozen. Jev never froze.

“Did Clarion talk a lot with Jevan?”

“Yeah.” Teone picked at her threadbare shoes. “Sort of. Jevan didn’t say much, but Clarion talked.”

“What about?”

“A chase...”

Clarion had captured Jevan all those weeks ago and used him as leverage to keep Zane quiet, but that had been a ruse too, a way for Clarion to reel Jevan in without making it look as though Jev were already connected to him. Whatever Clarion had over Jevan, it was enough to make him lie to Zane for years.

“The brothers pretend to be at odds with each other to catch out any dissent at court,” Teone continued, “but they’re real close. Luceran and Clarion were planning something. Jevan didn’t want to do it. We heard him yelling. He did it for her.” Teone nodded toward the mute elf beside her.

The quiet one nodded, licked her finger, and wrote in the dust on the floor.

Zane strained against his chains to read the words.

JEVAN. BROTHER.

He looked again at the graceful elf. She had the same dark skin as Jevan, and the same proud, shapely, shrewd eyes, like little got past her.

The curl of hair in Jev’s locket.

It belonged to her.

Clarion's words about finding the right motivation.

She was Jev's sister.

Which meant she'd been here since before Zane had known Jevan, before Zane had picked a fight with Jev in the street all those years ago. Jev had kept the locket on him the entire time Zane had known him. The locket was all Jev had left of his captured sister.

Jev's insistence on returning to Bayston every year, always around the same time. His disgust for dragons. His part in a game to kill the king and restart a war. It was all because of her. No wonder Jevan did as the dragons told him. He didn't have a choice.

He should have told Zane. Maybe he'd tried, and Zane had been too wrapped up in his own life to see what was right in front of him.

"What's your name?" Zane asked.

ROSA, she wrote, smiling shyly.

"Nice to meet you, Rosa. Your brother never forgot about you. Ever. He always came back here every year. Now I know why."

She nodded, her bottom lip quivering.

He shuffled back, leaned against the wall, and draped his chained wrists over his knees. It was always the same. Dragons bullied, fucked, kept, and used elves.

He had to get them out of here. All of them.

Maybe Akiem *would* come. He always had before. But while Akiem would fight Clarion, he wouldn't fight Luceran. Akiem was different around him, like Luceran tapped into that wounded, fragile part of him and used it against him. Akiem was strong, and getting stronger, but not around Luceran.

And all for a fucking game ...

Hundreds of elves dead, a city burned, because the two diamond dragonkin were... what? Bored?

He thought of Annie and her empty warehouse, of the burning streets and ash-covered bodies.

Maybe Annie's village was safe, or maybe Luceran would click his fingers and decide it was their turn to die. Fucking dragons. They all deserved to rot in the earth.

All but one.

Zane eyed the chains tying him down. If he somehow got free, he'd then have to make it out the door. There would be guards. After that, he'd have

to find his way out of the compound without anyone seeing, and he wouldn't be alone either, because he wasn't leaving anyone here to suffer under Clarion. Rosa, Teone, and Helana were all coming with him.

Whatever he did, he had to do it fast, before the windowless room sucked the strength from his veins. Elves needed light to live. The girls and Jev's sister, despite their obvious trauma, appeared alert.

"Do they take you somewhere to get light?"

Teone nodded. "The guards take us outside when the days are warm. They know we'd die without sunlight."

"Do those guards have keys to these?" He showed her the shackles.

"Yes, but we tried to take the keys once. That's when Rosa lost her tongue. They're too strong."

"Don't make him angry," Helana whispered, her voice hoarse. "He'll hurt us, not you. It's how his mind works."

She curled closer against her sister.

And that was exactly how Clarion controlled them.

Rosa tucked herself back into the corner but kept her gaze on Zane, as a warning or encouragement, he couldn't tell. Teone and Helana huddled closer still. The room reeked of blood and sex and dragon. If he did nothing, they'd all die here. Elves would continue to be used and slaughtered and nothing would change. Zane was done waiting for change. Going forward, he'd be more like Akiem and change the future himself.



"WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS ONE?"

A boot jabbed Zane in the gut.

He dragged his eyes open and blinked wearily at the guard.

"He needs light," Teone said.

"He just got here."

Zane added a groan for effect.

"Shit," the guard grumbled and crouched. The chains rattled. "Hey, hold him, eh. Just in case."

Hands found Zane's shoulders as the chains slunk through the loop and fell to the ground. Zane flung his head back, impacting hard with the second guard's chin, and lunged forward, wrapping the free chain around the first

guard's neck. He had seconds to make this count. Yanking the dragon close, he twisted the links, chinking them together. The dragon bucked and kicked, writhing and twisting. He clawed at the chain, then swung an arm behind him and snagged a handful of Zane's hair, wrenching out a fistful.

The second guard growled.

Zane glanced behind him. The twins lunged, taking his legs out as he recovered from Zane's head-butt, and then the twins were on him, scratching at his face and throat.

Citrus burned Zane's tongue.

The dragon he choked was about to shift. Zane tightened his hold, hooked a leg around him, and pulled him closer still. His thrashing slowed. The lemony bite in the air grew so potent it burned Zane's throat and stung his eyes. If the beast shifted, they'd all die, crushed under dragon.

Magic rippled up Zane's arms like heat haze on a summer's day. Zane's vision blurred. Muscles trembling, he cinched the chain tighter. There was no going back. The dragon would shift whatever happened. He had to die in the next seconds.

The guard's struggling slowed. He twitched. Zane prayed to Alumn it was over. The male finally fell still, and the pungent smell of dragon thinned.

Zane shoved the body off and twisted, grabbing for the remaining guard's kicking leg. The twins had him pinned, but he was writhing free. Zane landed a punch to the beast's throat, choking off his air, then clutched his head and smashed his skull against the floor. Something cracked, the floor or bone. Zane slammed the guard's head into the floor again, and the dragon stopped moving.

Shit.

They'd done it.

"The keys. Quickly!"

He rummaged through the dragon's pockets and found the loop of keys. They were getting out of here. He stood. All he had to do was find the right key for the right lock and—

A punch slammed into his shoulder, throwing him forward. He stumbled over a dead dragon. Another punch nailed his lower back, lighting his body of fire. Zane's knees slammed into the floor. His breaths came fast, his body ablaze with pain. Someone screamed, and he couldn't be sure it wasn't him.

“An elven bow is an effective weapon,” Clarion said. “This one supposedly killed a king. I took it from our mutual friend.”

Zane felt the weight of the arrows lodged in his back, one in his shoulder and the other lower, near his waist. He looked down. A bloody arrowhead protruded from his shoulder and glistened. His vision fuzzed and cracked. The shoulder wound wouldn't be fatal, yet, but the one lower, the one his brain had already numbed for his own sanity, might see him dead.

If he could just breathe for a moment and collect his thoughts. He had to stop Clarion. Nothing else mattered.

The bow clattered to the floor. Zane saw it there, Jevan's bow. Clarion probably thought his using it to kill Zane was poetic.

The twins scurried back against the wall.

Clarion's boots thumped on the floor.

Agony tore through Zane's back, and he cried out.

An arm hooked around Zane's neck, clutching him back against the hot hardness of the dragon's thighs. Clarion showed Zane the bloody arrow and tossed it to the floor. “Your dragon thinks you're alive, living a free life with the elves. He bargained his freedom on it. What a shame he doesn't know you're here.”

Akiem was here? Zane opened his mouth to ask, but he tasted too much blood and choked on the words.

“The problem is... Akiem isn't so easily cowed. He plays at submissive, but it won't last, and that's where you come in, Red.”

Zane had failed.

Nothing had changed. Their fates still rested in Clarion's hands.

“My job is to provide a little... insurance.”

He pulled Zane around to face him, his strength monstrous. The lord grinned and pulled a dagger from his belt. “This”—he grabbed Zane's right hand—“will be the perfect gift.”

The knife's hungry edge snagged beneath Zane's little finger.

Zane tore free and scrabbled back, but he only made it as far as the wall. There was no way out. Clarion stalked forward.

Behind him, one of the twins snatched the discarded arrow. Clarion hadn't seen.

Zane jerked his chin, keeping the lord's attention on him. “Akiem will stop you.”

Clarion's mouth pulled into a grin. He grabbed for Zane's hand. Zane pulled away, but thick fingers locked around his neck. The dragon's smile twisted into a snarl. He tore Zane's hand out from behind him, pinned Zane's wrist to the wall, and pressed the knife against the base of Zane's little finger. "This is for Akiem. A little reminder to behave now that he's Luceran's pet again."

No...

The knife cut in.

He tried to stay silent, tried to make it so Clarion didn't win, but the cry tore free. The knife sawed, and with the strength of dragon behind it, the blade cut through muscle and bone.

Clarion staggered back and showed Zane the severed tattooed finger.

Zane clutched his throbbing hand to his chest, staring at the bloody digit, unable to believe that the finger had once belonged to him.

Helana lunged. She slashed the arrow at Clarion. He swung his arm out, backhanding her so hard she flew backward. The chains snapped tight, yanking her down. Her head struck the floor with a sickening crack. She didn't move, didn't blink... didn't breathe.

"No... no, no, no..." Teone pulled her dead sister into her lap and rocked her.

"Fucking elves." Clarion picked up the arrow, snapped it in two over his knee, and threw the pieces at Zane. "You did that!"

"Akiem will rip your wretched heart out!" Zane's voice cracked, like the rest of him, coming apart between shivers and sickness.

Clarion bared his teeth. "Akiem is Luceran's bitch."

He left. The door slammed closed.

Shudders racked Zane. He looked at the broken pieces of arrow, felt the wounds burn and throb in his back, cradled his wounded hand, and stared into Helana's empty eyes amid Teone's quiet sobs.

There was a single strand of hope left.

Clarion thought Akiem broken and weak. He was wrong.

The Black Prince was here, and that changed everything.

CHAPTER 29



Akiem

BAYSTON'S FIRES HAD DWINDLED, so only a few strings of smoke trailed over the city. As dragon, Akiem perched atop the broken building Zane had taken him to and shown him what he could do with his smart mouth.

A few elves skittered among the city ruins, defying the dragons soaring above. They wouldn't be attacked, not Akiem on Luceran's invisible leash. Luceran had given his word, and curiously, Akiem believed it. Dragons were dragons. They did the things they did because they could. Luceran was no different from the jeweled thousands of miles across the sea. There was little more dangerous in this world than a bored king.

It wasn't as though Akiem hadn't suffered beneath a ruling dragon before. This was his destiny. No matter how far he flew, the same life caught up with him. Always someone else's beast, never his own.

At least Zane was safe.

His elf would see sense and move on. If he returned to Bayston for Akiem or Jevan, Luceran would kill him. Zane knew that. Despite making some questionable choices, Zane knew when to quit.

Except when it came to anyone he cared about. Did he include Akiem in that?

The king's call rang out across the city, summoning Akiem back to the compound.

He dove off the side of the building and swooped low, his gaze divided between the elves scattering below and the dragons lazily circling above. Perhaps he could keep the peace this way, with him positioned between the two, protecting one from the other. The only cost would be his freedom. Cheap, then, as what did he know of freedom?

He shifted back to man at the compound and walked the hallways, tracking Luceran down to one of the many double-height rooms the king used for gatherings. Today, he stood alone at a long table, a small box in front of him. Energy strummed around him, the type that usually signaled an imminent shift.

Akiem approached, and having abandoned any hint of pride, he knelt at the king's side and bowed his head, grateful he'd left his hair down to cover the innately vulnerable spot at the back of his neck.

"There are to be executions," Luceran said.

Akiem lifted his head, peering up the king's figure. His intricate lace-and-leather attire highlighted the purple in his eyes. "Not elves?"

"Yes."

"Our agreement—"

"—could not cover all elves," the king snapped.

Akiem rose without permission. "You knew what I referred to. Elves in this city, in your territory, at least. That was our agreement."

Luceran stared back, light to Akiem's dark. "This fascination with elves is unseemly," he snarled. "Since your return, you have given me nothing of yourself."

It had been only a day. "Allow me some clarity. I haven't allowed you to fuck me, so you will kill elves until I do?"

The king's eyes narrowed. "You are to be mine, in all ways, or the elves die. It's really quite simple."

This wasn't like Luceran. The murder of elves, perhaps, but forcing sex hadn't been his way. At least, Akiem had believed as much. But how well did Akiem know him? The brothers had been playing their game this whole time. Even Luceran had said Akiem did not know the dragon he served. Perhaps, now that the game was over, he was seeing the king's true colors. In which case, he really was like all the other jeweled. Bite, take, own, fuck. Luceran had just dragged it out, enjoying the chase more than most, but he was still dragon.

"How many elves are to be executed?" Akiem asked.

“Three.”

“What is their crime?”

Luceran faced Akiem. “No crime other than being elves.” His beautiful eyes thinned, lashes sharpening. “Your elf, the one that fascinates you so, he took your coin for sex? I’ve been known to hire elves for all manner of work. They’ll do almost anything for coin...”

The switch in topic tilted Akiem’s balance. His heart stuttered, the implications landing hard. He recalled Zane pocketing his coin before dropping to his knees. He didn’t take payment for sex, but for Akiem he had. What else had he taken payment for? Luceran had spies everywhere—including Jevan.

Was Zane too? Nobody was that good a liar. The moments with Zane had been real. The damn kiss in the dark room—yet he had gotten inside the compound easily, and right after Akiem had handed Jevan over, Luceran had attacked, as though he had known where Akiem would be. Someone had told him. Zane.

He reached for the table, needing its solid surface.

It wasn’t possible.

“Clarion would see you dead. He believes you’re too dangerous to be allowed to roam freely,” the king continued, but Akiem’s screaming thoughts drowned out the words. “He doesn’t believe you’ll submit.” Luceran pressed a cool hand against Akiem’s chest and spread his fingers, claiming him. “He wants your head. I’ve refused him, of course, but he’ll take the heads of the three elves in his care instead.”

“Another test?” The question sizzled on Akiem’s tongue.

“He wants you to lash out. Will you?”

‘*Mercenary. Among other things,*’ Zane had said in the elven bar.

He’d admitted to the seduction to save his friend. Had that been the only reason?

“Did you pay him to seduce me?” Akiem’s voice sounded low and rough, dragging from his depths emotions he struggled to hide. *Feelings*. Real feelings for an elf whose smile warmed his cold center, whose laugh Akiem would pay to hear again. Had it all been for coin? How well did he know him? No more or less than he knew Luceran or anyone this side of the ocean. But it had seemed so real—the only real thing in Akiem’s entire life.

“He is an elf, Akiem.” Luceran’s voice softened. “You are dragon.” The king’s eyes sparkled. His cool hand cupped Akiem’s cheek. “Take the place

I offer beside me. Submit to me, be mine in all ways, and I'll convince Clarion to stop the executions. Peace will be restored."

Peace. All Akiem had to do was submit to the king.

He'd thought there might be another life out there for him, one with an elf, *protecting elves*. He leaned into Luceran's touch and closed his eyes. Even if his time with Zane had been true, they had no future together. Akiem *was* dragon. What else was there but Luceran and a dragon life beneath him?

Akiem dipped his head, submitting. "Free the three elves first."

Luceran frowned and leaned a hip against the table. "I'll need assurances."

He flicked his gaze up. "Is my word not enough?"

The king's smile slithered as though it had a life of its own. "I hear it in your voice and see it in the way you stand: you were once revered among your kind. A ruler, even. It's that which worries my brother and that which I must control."

"What I once was does not matter. What I am here, now, is wholly yours."

Luceran stood, bringing him too close to Akiem. "Give me a promise of more." The king's simmering power tried to lure Akiem in and have him rub himself against him, but a shocking repulsion kept Akiem rooted. He'd been willing, eager even, not so long ago, before the elf had come into his life, but as the king again claimed his jaw in his grip, Akiem's heart thudded, readying for escape, not pleasure. It should be simple. Luceran was just another dragon, and Akiem had suffered under far worse, but something in him had changed. *He* had changed.

The king's cool lips brushed Akiem's, urging him to open. Zane's touches had left Akiem breathless. Luceran's left him cold.

He had to do this. To save lives. For peace. If he could control the king with a kiss, with more, the cost was hardly anything.

Akiem parted his lips and nudged the king's mouth, giving Luceran the response he wanted, even as every instinct demanded he tear away. Just a kiss.

Akiem rode his hand down the curve of Luceran's back, pulling him in close, hardness against hardness. Only Akiem wasn't hard, not where it counted.

Luceran crowded close. The table dug into the back of Akiem's thighs, the pressure reminding him that he was trapped in more ways than one.

The kiss hastened, messy tongue and lips together. Akiem pulled on the memory of Zane's kiss, the one from the dark room, the one that had started it all. *Dragon, kiss me or let me go.* The elf's eyes had sparkled in the dark, full of mischief and humor. Akiem heard his laugh now, its dirty rumble making him wish for time alone with the elf. Lies or not, Akiem ached for Zane. Finally, his cock was waking. He just had to imagine Luceran was Zane to get through this.

Luceran's hand captured Akiem's hips. The king yanked him groin-to-groin and mouthed up Akiem's jawline, nipping below his ear. Luceran's interest dug into Akiem's hip. Too hot and hard. *Unwanted.*

The king's teeth pinched Akiem's neck.

Instincts snapped. Akiem shoved him before he could stop the reflex. Luceran's violet eyes flared. He bared his teeth and lunged. Akiem swung a fist, like he had with Clarion. His knuckles struck the king's chin, whipping his head back.

A new kind of lust burned through Akiem: the killing kind. He stepped forward. Luceran recovered and swung for Akiem, but he broadcast the attack in his shoulders. Akiem ducked and sprang off his back foot. He slung his arms around Luceran's middle, tackling him to the floor. The king's skull hit hard.

Power.

Magic.

Diamond sparks danced across Akiem's skin.

The shift. Akiem had seconds to retreat. He rolled aside, flung his arms over his head, and weathered the suffocating outpouring of magic. Strength and power slammed into his back and sloshed over him, drowning him in Luceran's scent.

The king roared, the noise so loud in the suddenly small room that it shook plaster from the ceiling.

The door was too far to make a run for it, and if he ran, Luceran would pounce. Akiem clambered to his feet. Hard scale smacked him in the back, throwing him against the table. Hot breath blasted behind him. A warning. In this form, Akiem was a single bite away from death.

The shift tried to pull Akiem apart, but if he shifted, he'd fight and lose.

Luceran's massive maw shoved into Akiem's shoulders, throwing him forward, *bending* him into submission. He sprawled forward and stayed down. The king could do no more while Akiem was man and himself dragon, besides kill him.

A burbling growl rumbled around the room.

Akiem lifted his hands and slowly turned.

Luceran's shimmering diamond-white scales filled the room. The lamplight licking down his sides and over his wings made him shine. His eyes glowed violet, each orb bigger than Akiem.

The diamond king bared his teeth, reminding Akiem exactly who sat on the throne at the top of the food chain in this land. The dragon shook his head, plodded backward, and shifted back into man, blinding Akiem again. This time, when Luceran approached, there was no room on his lips for smiles. He scooped up the box on the table and shoved it at Akiem's chest.

"You need more persuasion."

Akiem breathed hard through his nose, riding out the adrenaline. He took the box and turned it over in his hand. Just a small wooden box with a simple latch. A gift? Now?

"Open it," Luceran ordered.

Akiem flicked the latch and lifted the lid. A single finger lay on bloody silk. A finger marked with the sweepingly elegant swirls of Zane's tattoos.

A growl rolled up Akiem's throat, but Luceran's hand snapped out, snake-fast, and snatched his neck, choking off the sound before it could break free. "Your wretched elf will die unless you submit to me, *prince*."

Rage set Akiem's veins ablaze. Zane was here. Clarion was likely torturing him. The deal for peace was bullshit. It always had been. Whether Zane had been paid to fuck him didn't matter. Everything was lies. Everything but the wrongness of this world. That was real, and he'd fight to see it put right.

Luceran's human snarl was no less threatening than his dragon one. "I'll have Clarion cut pieces off him and present them to you until there is nothing left."

"You lying coward," Akiem hissed. "You're the same as every jeweled."

"I didn't lie. I didn't know my brother had captured him, but I appreciate his initiative. Especially as you need a lesson in obedience." Luceran shoved Akiem to his knees. "Service me, prince, or your elf dies."

Service me, elf.

“Make me come or his cock will be the next gift I deliver.”

Akiem’s thoughts blurred, finding that faraway place where nothing hurt him. He threaded his fingers through the ties of the king’s pants and yanked them loose. Zane’s pleasurable laughter in his head turned to that of Akiem’s mother’s, and then to his father’s every time he’d fucked Akiem into the ground. All the times he’d been used and shut in the dark, the times he’d burrowed so deep inside himself that he’d become a shadow, they should have prepared him for this. They had—until Zane had shown him kindness, shown him how things *could* be different. Lies or not, Akiem knew there was light in the world. He’d seen it, and he’d protect it for others, if not for himself. *That* was who he was: a protector of those who could not protect themselves.

Falling to his knees, he wrapped his fingers around the king’s erection, barely feeling it, *refusing* to feel it. The shaft of heated maleness had lost all its appeal now that the king was forcing himself on him. He licked up, from balls to tip, tasting Luceran. The king shuddered, plunged his fingers into Akiem’s hair, and held him rigid, pinning him down without choice and no escape. Closing his lips around the solid cock, Akiem sent his mind farther into that dark place.

He clamped his teeth shut, sinking sharpness into muscular flesh.

Luceran roared, grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head back. His skull hit the table or floor, he didn’t know which. He smiled as pain throbbed, blood flowed, and his body went numb, unconsciousness rushing in to save him from whatever happened next.

One thought followed him down: the diamond brothers must die.

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CHAPTER 30



Zane

THEY LED THEM, chained at the hands, in a line so very like the one that had taken twelve elflings to their deaths. No bags over their heads, although Zane almost wished there were. His back burned, his jaw ached, and his hand throbbed where his digit was missing. He was alive, though, which had to be by damn luck or Alumn's grace. Helana had died for Zane's mistake. Her sister shuffled ahead, and in front of her, Rosa led the line, pulled along by a heavyset dragoon.

They twisted and turned through parts of the compound, rising and falling with steps and levels, until they emerged in a room Zane recognized. Dread set his teeth chattering. The chopping block in the center of the chamber bore the stains of Clarion's previous victims.

"Wait..." Jevan's panicked voice rose from the crowd of dragonkin. He fought his way to the front, prompting a wave of snarls. "You can't do this!"

Clarion moved in fast, kicked Jev's legs out, and slammed him face down on the floor. "One more word out of you and you'll join your friend."

"Kill me," Jevan hissed. "But save my sister. Please, by Alumn. Please don't hurt her anymore!" He broke down into sobs. "She's... been hurt... enough."

Rosa frantically shook her head, and Zane's instincts simmered all over again, lessening the pain from his wounds. The crowd, Jevan's sister, the block—it was all wrong.

The guard yanked the line forward, toward the waiting block.

Luceran sat on his ugly throne, looking resplendent in leather and silk. Beside him, standing rigid, his mask back on, was the king's shadow, Akiem. Only he didn't look like his shadow anymore. He wore a deep purple waistcoat stitched with silver lace and black trousers. His hair had been pinned and tied to mirror the king's. He looked like a possession, like a doll the king dressed up and did with as he pleased.

The sight punched Zane in the gut. He tripped and fell, only to be yanked upright and shoved along. There were more guards now. So many. Too many to escape. He looked for an escape anyway. For weaknesses in those around them. There were none. The dragons looked on, hungry for blood.

A few weeks ago, he'd stood among the crowd, watching an elf lose her head. He'd believed she'd deserved it. Alumn, he'd been so wrong.

He'd stumbled from one town to the next, taking coin, sometimes taking more, never caring about the lives around him. Until Akiem. Something about the dragon had made him see things differently. Now here he was, following in the dead elf's footsteps, and there Akiem was, standing beside the king, exactly like before.

Then it hit him. He would die here.

Akiem caught his eye, but there was nothing readable in his hard bronze glare. A terrible, all-consuming sense of dread chilled Zane to the bone. What if Akiem had been pretending this whole time, like the diamond brothers had? No, it wasn't possible. What Zane had felt between them—the kiss in the dark room and everything after—couldn't be faked. And Clarion had told Zane he was leverage to make sure Akiem behaved. Alumn, his heart ached to see him there, right back where they'd begun, wrapped in the king's diamond-grip.

Akiem leaned to the side and whispered something in the king's ear. His lips moved carefully, precisely. The king frowned and drummed his fingers on the chair's arms.

With a flick of his wrist, Luceran summoned Clarion to him. The lord abandoned Jevan and knelt in front of his brother. More murmurs strummed between them.

Akiem had said something to stop this. He saved elves now. He'd rung the city's bells for elves. He'd fought his own kind for elves. He'd see them safe. Zane was sure of it. They'd escape the block and the axe. It wasn't over yet.

"Proceed," Luceran said.

Zane's heart dropped.

The guard grabbed Rosa, unclipped her from Teone, and dragged her toward the block. She went gracefully, her head held high.

Jevan bellowed his dissent and was met with Clarion's swift kick to his gut. He curled into himself, but his sobs went on. He'd worked for Luceran and Clarion because they had Rosa. They'd promised to release her, and now she would die. They'd all die.

Zane found Akiem's glare again. *Don't let this happen.*

Akiem was strong. He was the strongest damn dragon Zane had ever known. Nobody could survive what he had unless they knew how to fight, and by Alumn, Akiem's bronze glare told how he could fight every single dragon here. Why wasn't he?

"Not her," Luceran corrected. "The red-haired one."

Shock clinched Zane's chest, squeezing out all the air in his lungs. A guard grabbed him, unlocked his shackles from the chain, and yanked on his wrists, dragging him toward the block. His heart pounded so hard he didn't hear the dragons raise their voices or Jevan sobbing.

Akiem... Akiem could stop this.

Akiem wasn't moving. His face had the same regal blankness as the first time Zane had seen him there, beside the king.

No... it couldn't all have been a lie. The kiss.... That single damn kiss in the dark room. That had been *real*. *Dragon, kiss me or let me go*. Akiem wore the lies he told himself, but he'd told Zane the truth.

Zane pulled on the guard's hold, yanking him off balance. "Akiem!"

The guard's fist flew in. He crumpled around the blow, but the dragon held him up and pulled him along.

"Akiem... please stop this."

The crowd stirred. Luceran's eyes narrowed. Clarion approached with his axe slung over his shoulder, his smile as broad as his weapon's curve.

Akiem did nothing. Didn't twitch, didn't blink, didn't look away.

With every passing second, fear stabbed at Zane's wrecked heart. Could it be that Zane had been taken in by a dragon? He'd fallen in love again and

fallen hard. No dragon could love an elf. The beasts weren't capable.

'You believe I'm capable of caring?' Akiem had once asked.

Zane had known they did not care or love, but Akiem had been different. Could it all have truly been lies? Another dragon game played?

The guard shoved Zane to his knees at the block.

Horror made him numb and stupid. Splinters stuck up from the block. Each jagged cut marked an elven death. Dried blood stained the wood. He blinked in disbelief. He couldn't die like this.

Hands gripped on his shoulders. Thick fingers clamped around the back of his neck and shoved him down. Splinters thrust into Zane's neck. He wheezed, his body rebelling, trying to eject him into unconsciousness.

He faced away from the king, from Akiem, so he saw only the faces of dragonkin he didn't know, their eyes hungry, and Jevan, on his feet but restrained by a dragon twice his size. Jevan's eyes apologized for everything.

He wished he'd done things differently, wished he'd shot Clarion seconds before Jevan, wished he'd spent just a little more time with Akiem. Maybe it would have made a difference. Maybe it would have made *him* different. Most of all, he wanted to feel Akiem's warm hand in his again, one last time.

Clarion moved into the corner of Zane's vision. The dragon crouched and cocked his head, peering deep into Zane's eyes. "Your pretty head will adorn a spike in the middle of the burnt city as a warning to all elves. Don't fuck with dragons."

He straightened, stepped back, and let the axe handle slip through his fingers, catching it at the right angle to swing.

Zane squeezed his eyes closed, not wanting to see, then flung them open again, *needing* to see.

Cold air kissed the nape of his neck. Clarion breathed in. Zane heard the lord lift the axe.

One second and another passed.

Alumn, forgive me.

His breath raced, body caught on the edge of fear.

The hands holding him vanished. He turned his head, expecting to see Clarion, but Akiem filled his vision instead. Akiem lunged, and the guards moved in to stop him.

Clarion's axe glinted, about to fall.

Akiem grabbed Clarion's raised arm, capturing the final strike before it fell.

"All elves are under my protection," he said, the words crisp and loud and so fucking bright in Zane's thudding head.

Zane kicked back, catching Clarion's left shin and dropping the lord to a knee. Clarion grunted, more surprised than alarmed. He swung his glare to Zane, baring his teeth.

Akiem tore the axe from Clarion's distracted grip, lifted it over his head, and swung it down. The blade sliced through Clarion's neck and rang like a bell when it hit the stone floor.

The lord's head dropped, eyes open and mouth agape. He wasn't fucking smiling now. His body slumped and fell forward with a thud, his heart still pumping dragon blood across the floor.

Silence drowned the room.

Akiem stood over Zane. The axe in his hand dribbled thin trails of blood over his boots. A tick of a smile tugged at his lips.

Zane blinked, thoughts sluggish as he tried to understand how his head was still detached from his body. By Alumn, Akiem was *everything*.

A terrible, brittle screech shattered Zane's thoughts, as if the world were breaking in two. The king jerked from his throne, shift magic crackling and sparking around his human form.

Chaos boiled the crowd into motion. Dragonkin dashed for the exits. Akiem whirled, a blur of black, and swung the axe through the middle of a guard. The axe arced again, shining like a half moon, and slammed down on Zane's chains, shattering the links apart. "Get the others out!"

Akiem moved like liquid death, cutting through any who dared to rush him. The macabre sight enthralled.

Behind Akiem's dark outline, diamond spilled into the room, bubbling out of nothing into the enormous shape of claws and scales and wings.

"Akiem!"

Akiem retreated from the diamond king. No little axe could cut down Luceran now. He turned and grabbed Zane's good hand, lifting him to his feet. He saw the wraps around Zane's wounded hand and met Zane's eyes.

The king screamed his fury and flung out diamond wings, scooping up some of the fleeing crowd and tossing them against the walls, not caring that they were Dragon. Rage had blinded him. He thrashed his brutal crown of bone into swathes of running figures. Among them, an elf lay on his side.

“Oh Alumn, no...”

Jevan.

Luceran had seen him. The diamond dragon’s eyes blew wide, and fire churned behind the scales low in his throat.

Akiem pulled Zane close. “Save them,” he breathed, jerking his chin toward where Rosa and Teone huddled together. He gently pushed Zane into motion. “Go.” He turned away, heading for the enormous and enraged dragon.

Zane stumbled to Rosa’s side. “C’mon... both of you.”

Luceran’s roar tore through the air, the walls, the world. Zane looked back.

Akiem was close, a smudge of black against a monster of diamond white. He circled the axe over his head and set it free. The blade whirled, struck Luceran in the jaw, flinging the king’s head back, and stayed lodged there. The king thrust his head upward, smashing through the ceiling in his madness. Debris rained, but Akiem dashed in, hauled Jevan to his feet, and pulled him into a run.

They would be okay.

They had to be okay.

Zane took Rosa’s hand and led her into the scattering dragonkin. The taste of dragon burned his throat and made his eyes water. Some would shift, and if that happened, this entire compound would collapse around them. They had to get out and fast.

Dragonkin funneled through the exits, carrying Zane, Rosa, and Teone along.

“This way...” Akiem and Jevan appeared ahead. A sob tried to choke Zane as Jevan sent him a sheepish smile. Akiem flung open a door, steering them out of the chaos and into a quiet side room with one window.

Roars tunneled after them. The walls and ceiling shook. Cracks snaked across the floor.

Rosa flung the window open and peered out.

“Jump,” Jevan said.

They each scrambled free and, following Akiem, ran into the remains of Bayston.

CHAPTER 31



Akiem

THE FOUR ELVES were in no condition to flee the city. The speechless female appeared to be the strongest among them. Zane had been tortured. The smell of old, sour blood and sickness on him made Akiem want to shift and rip into anything and everything. One of the twins from Clarion's chamber was numbed by shock, and Jevan shivered and stumbled, his adrenaline wearing off fast.

Akiem led them into the hollowed-out insides of a derelict building. Piles of burnt wood thrummed with heat. He tucked the elves into a corner and gathered anything flammable, then nursed a fire from the ashes so they'd be warm. The smoke would go unnoticed among Bayston's smoldering ruins.

With the fire stable and the elves huddled around it, he leaned next to a hole in the wall that had once been a front door. From there, he scanned the street, watching, waiting. Occasionally, the king's roars echoed through the night. The terrible cries spoke of vengeance and torment.

Only death, or something that would make him wish for it, waited for Akiem at the compound. He glanced back at each elf, appraising their condition. They all tugged at his heart, the part he'd thought lost and empty.

Whatever the king's lies, whatever Zane did or didn't do, none of that changed the fact that elves shouldn't suffer. Protecting them was Akiem's

purpose now.

He tasted Clarion's blood on his lips and smelled it on his clothes. He flexed his fingers, feeling the axe strike home again. It could so easily have been Zane's head that had fallen. Luceran hadn't reacted well to Akiem almost severing his cock between his teeth. All of the elves in Bayston had been due to be killed and butchered, starting with Zane.

It wouldn't have ended there. Another elf, another bribe. On and on it would have gone.

Akiem didn't submit.

Not anymore.

He didn't kneel, and he didn't bow, and he damn well didn't stand by and watch the innocent pay with blood for a game of peace. He tore Luceran's pins from his hair and tossed them to the ground, then loosened the too-tight buttons of the damn waistcoat. It was suffocating, all of it.

In those last moments, he'd whispered to the king that if he went ahead with the executions, he would never submit to him. Luceran had proceeded anyway, out of spite.

"Hey..." Zane approached slowly, his steps deliberate.

Akiem shifted his gaze back to the piles of rubble on the street. Rats scurried about, but no dragons. They'd come. It wouldn't be safe here for long.

"Thank you," Zane said behind him, sounding unsure.

"It's fine."

"For a while there..." Akiem glanced back and caught Zane's nervous smile. "I thought you were going to watch me die." Zane propped a shoulder against the broken wall. A smudge of dirt and blood marked his cheek and jaw. His green eyes had lost some of their luster. "You came through. You got us out. I don't think you've ever once let me do—"

"Did Luceran pay you to seduce me?" Akiem stared at the piles of rock outside.

"He told you that?" His brow tightened, lips too. "No. The whole seduction thing was a shit idea, but it was *my* idea. I wouldn't work for that worm for all the coin in the world." Zane straightened and ventured closer. His scrutiny rode over Akiem's face. "Shit, you believed him?"

"I..." Akiem winced, and closing his eyes, he pinched away a new ache. "I care. About you. He knew and twisted it, put doubts in my head."

Zane stayed silent too long. Akiem opened his eyes and found Zane's crooked smile tucked into his cheek.

"You care about me?" the elf asked. His smile twitched and grew.

He'd taken Clarion's head for Zane, and gods, he'd do it again in a heartbeat. This was about saving elves, but it was also about saving *his* Red. He turned toward him, making him look up. Akiem brushed his knuckles down Zane's bruised and gritty cheek. So fragile and so full of life. To think Clarion had almost ended Zane's life. It tore at Akiem's new-found ability to feel and almost made him wish he didn't so it wouldn't hurt so much. "Your head is too pretty to lose."

Zane arched a russet brow. "Tell me again how pretty I am."

Akiem chuckled, but the laughter died as he saw how the bruises traveled down Zane's neck. His jacket and shirt were bloody, and his bandaged hand... The dragon in him wanted to tuck Zane in close and lick him until the hurt went away. Their differences were worlds apart, that much was true, and elves were fragile, even this fiery one.

Luceran would come.

Enraged, he'd destroy everything to get to Akiem.

Everyone was at risk, especially those close to him.

"Rest..." Akiem stepped away.

Zane's good hand caught his and pulled him back. The campfire light sparked in his eyes.

"I care about you too," his elf said. A blush of heat warmed Zane's cheeks, and it was all Akiem could do not to grab him and devour him in ways dragons did not normally devour elves. "Clarion took my finger, and you took his fucking head. You think you're not worth loving? You're so wrong, Akiem."

Loving? He masked his shock by pulling Zane in and planting a gentle kiss on his forehead. "Wrong, am I, elf? I'm beginning to believe," he whispered, sliding the words down Zane's cheek, "because of you."

He drew him in tight, needing to feel Zane close, especially as he smelled a sweet sickness on the elf that would only get worse. Zane molded perfectly against Akiem and sighed as Akiem brought his arms around and held him tight. Dropping his head, he breathed in Zane's fresh scent, absorbing it into his dragonheart, where he claimed Zane as his.

Carefully, reluctantly, Akiem let him go. "We need supplies. Stay by the fire, by them..."

“Rosa is Jevan’s sister,” Zane quietly explained.

He nodded at Jevan and his sister, both huddled together by the fire. Akiem thought of his own broodsister, dead so long now he’d almost forgotten her face, but he remembered her love. Jevan looked up, met Akiem’s gaze, and nodded.

Leaving them wasn’t easy. He lingered nearby in the shadows, should any dragons slink by, but none came. Akiem scavenged food and medical boxes the elves had left behind when they’d abandoned the city. Finding anything not burned took until the sun rose. He returned, arms full of stale bread and wrapped fruit that smelled like smoke. He’d found basic medicine, but the scent of spoiled blood around their camp suggested Zane’s condition had worsened in his absence.

The fire had burned down to cinders. Zane slept on his side, with Rosa and Teone watching him. Jevan approached as soon as Akiem had climbed back inside the camp.

“He’s feverish,” Jevan murmured.

“I have medicine.” He set the bundle of goods down beside the fire and rummaged through them with Jevan, but little inside was suitable for treating the infection ravaging Zane’s body.

“It’s not enough.” Jevan frowned and rocked back on his heels. “We need a healer. There’s a deep wound in his lower back. It’s hot to the touch. I can’t get much out of Rosa, but I think he tried to escape and Clarion caught him. Helana was killed. It looks as though Zane was stabbed, and it went deep.”

Akiem straightened. Rosa watched him rise, her face tight with concern. He approached Zane’s side, and she scuttled backward.

“It’s all right,” Jevan said. “Akiem won’t hurt you.”

Zane didn’t wake as Akiem knelt beside him. He’d lost his color, and his lips had blanched. The bloody marks on Zane’s clothes indicated worse wounds hid beneath. “I know someone, but I’ll have to shift to take him there—to take you all.”

“You want us to...” Jevan swallowed. “Go with you... as dragon?”

Akiem nodded. “You’ll need to hold on. I’ll not be slow. The flight will not be easy.”

“I don’t know...”

“He’ll want you there when he wakes.” *If he wakes.* Akiem could not allow that thought purchase. He carefully scooped Zane into his arms and

headed outside. Zane mumbled a few words, none of which made any sense, and tucked himself against Akiem's shoulder.

Flying in daylight was risky enough, but to do so with passengers would slow him, making him more obvious above the cityscape. The risk was huge, but if he didn't go, Zane would die here.

"Dragon...?"

Jevan's voice carried far in the empty street. Akiem turned and set Zane's limp body down on the road. Unconsciousness had hold of him now. Akiem stroked Zane's hair back from his face and tucked it behind his pointed ear, like he'd been afraid to do a hundred times before.

"I was wrong about you," Jevan said.

"No, you were right." Akiem backed up, gauging the distance from the building to give himself space to shift. "I was everything you said, but I've changed. Zane helped me."

"I know... and I'm sorry." Jevan stepped forward, but Rosa's hand on his arm held him back. She nodded for Akiem to continue.

The shift happened quickly, rolling power through muscles and stretching it out through his wings. He gathered Zane's vulnerable body in his claws, careful to cradle him safely. So tiny a thing, his bright elf. So precious.

He dipped a wing and eyed the siblings. Jevan and Rosa climbed on, Teone behind them. They all settled between his wings. He prayed to the great gods that they held on, because once in the air, there would be no stopping.



AKIEM FLEW FAST and true to Annie's village. If any dragon saw him, he'd deal with the consequences later.

At the village, Annie got to work immediately, taking Zane from Akiem's claws, even as he growled a warning not to hurt him. Other villagers looked on. They watched the three elves slip down his wing and greeted them fondly, and when Akiem shifted, elves didn't flee or fling arrows. They acknowledged him, dipping their heads in respect, and waved him inside their village, as if he *belonged*.

What a strange feeling that was, and one so alien it confirmed he had never belonged anywhere before.

The elves invited him to wash up and eat, but his mind was too lost in thoughts of Zane. He waited, sitting against the wall outside Annie's house. Annie had barred him from entering. He couldn't get any closer physically, and instinct wouldn't let him leave, so he stayed there as the day faded into evening.

You think you're not worth loving.

Love. He knew it now. It kept him here, waiting outside the house, listening to every creak of the floorboards through the walls. It made his thoughts circle back to the impossible red-haired elf full of laughter and life, the bright star in Akiem's darkness. It made his body ache when they were apart, as though Zane were the missing piece he'd been searching for his whole life.

Waiting was killing him.

He paced and thought on Luceran's next move. Clarion's death would rock his world, especially as they'd been so close. Luceran would come for Akiem, but the display in the compound had shown he wasn't thinking rationally. Vicious and brutal. Desperate for vengeance. He'd make mistakes. Akiem could use that.

Luceran had to die.

As for the rest of the dragons, some would jostle for Luceran's place as the apex dragon. There had been plenty of *lords* at Luceran's court, each eager to outlive the king, but another jeweled as king would change nothing.

If Akiem were stronger, he could claim the throne. Those who had been present at the botched execution would see his attacking the lord and the king as him making such a claim, but not all. Akiem could not fight them all—alone.

In his home, half a world away, he'd seen elves rise up. He'd seen them fight for their land and their people. The elves on this side of the ocean were just as capable, but they had to *believe* they could make a change. Believing in change was the first, and most difficult, hurdle.

"You can see him now," Annie said, wiping her bloody hands on a towel.

Zane lay face down on the bed. Annie had stripped him to his waist, and cleaned and stitched two puncture wounds, one to his shoulder and another

to low on his back. Both could easily have been killing blows.

Damn elves were far too fragile. He reached for Zane's peaceful face, needing to touch him and hardly understanding why, but he quickly pulled his fingers back, fearing he might wake or hurt him.

"He's drugged. He won't wake for another few hours."

"Will he..." Akiem's voice cracked. "Will he be all right?"

"He'll be fine." Annie offered a gentle smile. "Nothing I can do about the finger, though."

A growl rumbled through Akiem. He dropped into the chair beside the bed and closed his eyes. In many ways, it had been easier when he had cared about nothing, but he wouldn't change it. Caring made him feel alive and true and strong—gods, so much stronger than before.

"What happened?"

He told her everything—from meeting Zane over a month ago, to the botched seduction, the king's deception, and Clarion's head falling beneath the lord's own axe. The more he spoke, the more roughness bled into his words, the dragon in him rising to the surface.

"Luceran will come for us."

"I'm sure he will." She seemed unconcerned. "We know you didn't kill the tutor. Our elflings all told of how you tried to save her. You really are quite the dragon."

Unsure how to respond, he dipped his head.

"I spoke to Zane before you were both taken... showed him something that might help stop the king. Did he tell you?"

"No."

"I'd like to show you when you're ready. Given the king's mental state, it could prove to be the opportunity we've been looking for."

He regarded Zane's unconscious form. No power in the world was strong enough to uproot Akiem from his side.

If Luceran was coming, so be it. Akiem would die protecting Zane. That was how things were. He found it comforting.

Annie smiled in understanding. "I'll bring some food by. Let me know when he wakes."

She left, and Akiem listened to the curious quiet inside his head. Peace. It was... strange to be at peace with himself.

He looked at Zane, at the bandaged hand with its missing digit and his blood-matted hair. Zane considered himself a coward. He was wrong. It

took courage to survive. Akiem wasn't giving *him* up, not for anything or anyone. He could only hope Zane felt the same way.

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CHAPTER 32



Zane

HE'D ALMOST DIED.

Apparently, it was becoming a habit.

He groaned, fighting his bruised and battered body. He wanted to stuff his face back into the pillow and ride out whatever would happen in a drug-muddled haze, but a dragonkin sat in the chair by the bed. He looked like he'd been there for hours and would stay there until the world turned to ash around them.

A shiver trickled down Zane's spine. A good one. He kinda liked knowing that Akiem would be there when he woke. He felt unworthy too, like this enormously powerful creature had picked the wrong lover. He wouldn't blame him for turning away. He kept expecting to find Akiem gone for good, but he hadn't abandoned them. He'd kept on fighting, even when the king had tried to lie his way into Akiem's affections. He still fought for good.

That fucking bastard lizard, telling Akiem he'd hired Zane.

Zane could see why Akiem might be pissed about the whole payment for services rendered. Shit, Zane made the worst decisions. He wouldn't change it, though, because if he hadn't pursued Akiem or had him pay for those services, they never would have gotten this far.

He looked like an ancient god. His hair was a smooth black curtain down his back, his face proud and hard, mouth harder, and eyes... Alumn, those damn eyes. They turned on him, and Zane's insides skittered with anticipation.

"Hi," he croaked, sounding like he'd been broken into a thousand pieces and hastily shoved back together again. He felt that way too, and when he tried to push off his chest, his shoulder barked in complaint and his back delivered a whip-like spasm of pain. Akiem moved so damn fast Zane didn't even see him until his warm hands were holding him, helping him to roll over. Well, that felt rather nice too.

"Slow and steady," the dragon said, "or Annie will force me to leave again."

The growl underlining his words made it clear he wouldn't leave, whatever Annie said.

"Did she hit on you?" Zane asked, mostly to see him frown, which he did.

"I'm dragon," Akiem said, like that was a deterrent.

Zane chuckled and wished he hadn't. Akiem fluffed his pillows and gently laid him back. He smelled of zesty, spicy things that Zane wanted to sink his teeth into. A warm, fuzzy feeling diluted some of Zane's all-over aches.

Akiem sat back down, but the frown stayed.

He'd said he cared. He'd cared even when he'd believed Zane had lied to him. Damn, this dragon was unique and wonderful and precious and all Zane's. He'd better not screw it up, which was easier said than done, seeing as his relationships usually crashed and burned.

"Luceran will come," Akiem said. "Annie mentioned she showed you something that might help."

The baited trap.

With Akiem as the bait.

"It won't work," Zane said. Annie could find something else to bait her trap with. She wasn't using Akiem. "Luceran is too clever to fall for it."

"What won't work?"

He told Akiem of the underground warehouse wired to blow and how it needed sufficient bait for it to work. Akiem's gaze hardened, his thoughts taking the notion and running with it.

"You're not doing it." Zane wasn't letting him go. He'd just found him.

“It has merit. Luceran is distracted. Now is the time to strike. There will not be another opportunity like it.”

“It’s too risky. You’d have to be down there too, and when the explosives blow... Annie doesn’t give a shit if you escape. She’ll blow the place with you still in there.”

Akiem’s cheek fluttered. He was still thinking on it, because he believed, somewhere inside that intense head of his, that he deserved to die.

“Akiem, there are other ways.”

“Name them.”

Zane pursed his lips. Sliding his legs off the bed, he sat on the edge. Akiem straightened, ready to catch Zane if he fell. If this prince had been raised to love instead of hate, he might have changed the world, but there was still time.

“There has never been a dragon like you. None of what happened in your past was your fault. Don’t throw yourself away because others can’t see who you really are.”

Seeing Akiem suffer for the sins of others broke something inside Zane. Even now, his dragon prince didn’t believe how special he was. He smiled softly like he believed Zane, but doubt clouded his beautiful bronze eyes—eyes Akiem despised. How could Zane make him see that he didn’t need to die to prove he had earned the right to live? Words failed him. Actions too. He did not know how to reach a dragon’s soul, but by Alumn’s light, he’d damn well try.

Akiem glanced behind him at the door, searching for an escape.

Zane reached out, pulling Akiem’s attention back to him. He cupped his cheek and drew him closer. The tiredness showed in his eyes. He wanted to live, didn’t he? Beneath all that stubborn exterior, he must believe in a future? Otherwise, why fight? And he sure knew how to fight. He’d been a creature made of pure vengeance in that execution hall.

His cheek was warm, and Zane drew him close, never letting go of his stare. He tried to drop his head, to submit, but Zane held him firm, bumping his forehead against his.

“You have a whole village out there who loves the Black Prince for all the good he’s done.” Zane wet his lips. “You have an elf here who loves him too.” He took Akiem’s hand and placed it over his heart, hoping Akiem could feel its racing beat. “It terrifies me.” The dragon’s eyes widened. “You terrify me, for a thousand reasons, but I’m not afraid of you.”

He stroked his hand down Akiem's face. The dragon's silken lashes fluttered, and he pushed into the touch, seeking more. He'd been hurt for so long by so many that he didn't know what it was to be loved. Zane wasn't sure he was the right person to show him.

"Stay with me," Zane whispered. "Live for me. Forget everyone else. You don't owe them anything and certainly not your life."

Akiem leaned back, out of Zane's hand.

"No." Zane caught his hand, fighting off a twinge of pain in his back. "My whole life, I've kept moving on, never allowing myself to stop or care. To care is to hurt. I've seen it a thousand times. I've never cared enough to fight for something, for someone, but I care now. I'll fight for you, even if you won't fight for yourself. Even if you don't want me, I'll still fight for you, because you're the only damn thing in this world I believe in. You hear me? I believe in you. My people believe in you, Black Prince. Don't throw that away. Luceran doesn't deserve your sacrifice."

Akiem's bronze eyes shone sharply, metal slivers cutting the light. "He'll kill you all to get to me. I have to stop him."

The worst of it was, Zane *knew* that.

"Alumn," he breathed out, saying the goddess's name as though she might hear his plea and help save one dragon. Just one. The rest could burn. This one was Zane's, forever and always.

Zane pulled him closer and sealed his words behind a gentle touch of lips and tongue. Love fucking hurt more than any physical wound. Akiem kissed him back, tentatively at first. So gentle for a dragon, and so right beneath Zane's hands. He withdrew too soon, and then he was pulling away, standing, and heading for the door. Zane watched him go, knowing love wasn't enough for this prince to save his own life.

He wanted to call him back, to stop him from going to Annie, but he'd said all the words he could. He'd bared his heart. Zane had nothing left to stop him with. He watched him walk into the sunlight, heart breaking for his forsaken prince.



THE VILLAGE WAS PREPARING for an autumn celebration despite the circumstances, or perhaps because of them. Zane couldn't decide if they

were all insane or absolutely brilliant for carrying on in the face of tragedy. The elves he spoke to told him they'd never let dragons take their traditions too. Fuck dragons.

As dusk crawled across the land, strings of electric lights buzzed awake through the village center. Human music played from a metal box. Definitely insane, he observed, unable to resist smiling with them. They'd gathered reserves of food from their scattered farms and bundled a feast together.

To Zane's surprise, Akiem was among them. He'd last seen him leaving the house to go look for Annie. That had been hours ago. Now he was seated among elves, taller than most but wrapped in elven clothing, helping him blend in.

A tiny elfling pulled at Akiem's jacket. He looked down at her, and she looked up at him, and Alumn, to see the pair of them... A wave of emotion hit Zane so hard he had to steady himself against a wall. She said something, her little hand still on his coat, and he smiled a softer smile meant for little elflings. Her mouth fell open in an awe-filled "oh," and then the girl's mother swooped in and scooped her up, apologizing. Akiem bowed his head and watched the mother and daughter return to their table. When she sat, the girl on her lap, Akiem turned his head and looked right at Zane as he stared like a damn fool.

Zane cleared his throat. His wounds throbbed, reminding him to take it easy, but nothing like they had before. He wouldn't be drawing any bows for a while, but he wasn't about to miss the party.

Zane slotted himself on the bench next to Akiem and nodded at the elves around them. "What did she ask?"

"Where my coat goes when I shift."

Damn good question. Zane wanted to know the answer. The staring elves at the table wanted to know too. He had a thousand questions like that one, but in between running for his life, almost being eaten, and losing a finger, he hadn't had a chance to ask Akiem much of anything. None of the small things, anyway.

Zane grabbed an apple and cut it into sections.

"Where does it go?" he asked, casually.

"The same place my human appearance goes."

Well, that wasn't an answer, but as he popped a slice of apple into his mouth and bit down, he caught Akiem smiling. Akiem knew it was a non-

answer.

“Why do you shift into a human? Why no, say, an elf?” another elf asked.

“Dragonkin learned long ago to adopt the appearance of the dominant species. At that time, it happened to be humans.”

“Now?” Zane asked, biting into his apple.

“Dragons.”

Of course.

“Could you make yourself into an elf?” Zane enquired.

“No.” Akiem’s mouth fought a smile. “Our appearance is fixed from the first time we shift. It’s mostly random, but always human.”

Zane tried to imagine Akiem slimmer and with pointed ears. A laugh tried to bubble up. He couldn’t see it. The pointed ears, maybe, but the rest of him was too large to ever be anything but dragon.

“The world you came from...” another elf asked. “There are elves there?”

“Yes. They are brave, if stubborn. Honorable. Fierce when they want to be. Ruthless too. But they don’t have your open kindness. You have welcomed me here as though I have earned the right to sit among you. The elves from across the ocean would not offer the same.”

“Actions are important,” the elf said. “You saved us and others. Dragon or not, you’ve earned your place among us.”

Others nodded their agreement.

Akiem dipped his chin, acknowledging the words, but to the others at the table, he remained stoic. He’d used that blank stare as a shield all his life. So much more went on behind it. Zane had seen his softer side and was seeing it now. Presented with kindness, he responded with the same.

The party went on, the music beat, and wine sloshed in cups. Zane helped himself to a few generous rounds, taking the edge off his angry wounds. The elves asked their questions, and Akiem answered them with patience and grace, melting Zane’s heart. He didn’t have to answer them. He didn’t have to be here. He even appeared to enjoy the attention. Would the wonder of Akiem never cease?

Annie passed by the table, drawing Akiem’s eye. She dipped her chin and moved on. A great deal had passed between them in that glance. So, Akiem had found her earlier in the day, and they’d made their plans, excluding Zane.

“When does it happen?” he asked, holding his frustration at bay.

“Tomorrow,” Akiem replied.

Alumn, he couldn’t stand it.

Picking up his cup, he left the table without looking back. He’d planned to track Annie down and demand she tell him every detail, but she’d disappeared among the crowd. Food and dancing and laughter—Zane drifted among it all, feeling detached even as an elf asked him to dance. He declined. Maybe the wine had dampened his mood, or maybe it was the fact his damn dragon was determined to kill himself.

An arm hooked into Zane’s and veered him left, toward the edge of the revelry. Akiem. Zane considered pulling away and stopping this before his heart shattered, but the thought disappeared as soon as Akiem’s bronze eyes captured his gaze and lured his body forward. Akiem steered him toward a shadowy gap between two houses where the electric light didn’t reach.

The crowd was close, just a few strides away.

Akiem propped Zane against the wall and braced an arm over his shoulder, hemming him in. In the shadows, his dragon simmered with power and life. He was so fucking beautiful. Zane didn’t want to meet his gaze or act on the urges that demanded he *touch and taste and feel*.

He downed the rest of his wine and let the cup hang empty from his fingers at his side. People danced, swirling and singing in couples, living life while they could.

He couldn’t do this with Akiem. It would just make tomorrow hurt more.

“Look at me,” the Black Prince ordered.

Pleasurable tingles skittered down Zane’s back, waking up parts of him that didn’t give a shit about his heart. Slowly, he looked up, first seeing his coat buttons and shirt, and then landed in his dragon’s gaze.

“You make me see the world differently,” Akiem whispered.

His warm fingers brushed Zane’s cheek, setting Zane ablaze. Heated desire strummed between them, the dragon full of want and Zane eager to submit, to feel those fingers circle and grip him elsewhere on his body, making him groan.

“Through your eyes, I see life and possibility and hope and all the things I’d become blinded to. You changed me and made me whole. I do not know how to voice these feelings you ignite inside me, but allow me to show you?”

Anger sparked at Zane's heart. How dare he speak of such things, knowing it wouldn't last because he'd chosen to forsake it all. Alumn, it hurt. His heart was breaking already. He dropped the cup and touched Akiem's hard face, feeling around the lines at the corner of his mouth, wishing he could stroke away the hurt that had made them so deep.

Akiem moved in, trapping Zane against the wall. Warmth and strength radiated through him and into Zane, stealing his breath and making it ragged. Zane curled a hand around Akiem's shirt, holding him back or holding him still, but Akiem was everywhere—in his head, on his lips, filling his vision with black-lined bronze eyes.

This kiss was like the first: gentle and seeking but fueled by a dragon's passion. Had anyone else ever felt Akiem this way? Zane opened, luring the dragon in, letting the kiss stoke his hunger. His heart was already broken. What was another cut to his soul? He'd stroked Akiem's scales, and he'd climbed onto his dragon back and soared above a burning city.

He was falling now. Zane forgot about the party, the people, and how close they all were. There was nobody and nothing else in the world but the hot sensation of dragon molded against him, of Akiem's hungry kiss demanding more, of Akiem's hands dropping to Zane's hip and ass, claiming him.

Alumn, it wasn't fair.

Zane needed to save Akiem before fate took him, but he didn't know how. Akiem had shown him who he really was, shown him that the face in the mirror was not the face of a monster but of a powerful male with a gentle soul. Metal or jeweled, none of that mattered. Akiem was his own person.

Zane's grip on his shirt tightened and pulled. The kiss was a flame, growing hotter and brighter, consuming Zane. He needed all of Akiem on him, in him, in every way, but the dragon's touches were so terribly gentle, as though he were cherishing each one, knowing it would be their last.

When Akiem's scandalous mouth trailed down Zane's neck, he arched into the dragon and sank his hands down his back, folding him close. Too many layers. Zane needed them torn free, including the invisible layers Akiem hid inside. He needed him raw and open and beneath Zane's hands and mouth.

A growling rumble strummed through Akiem and shuddered through Zane, tightening every breath. Every part of him strained to be touched.

“Is this love?” the Black Prince whispered.

Zane’s wrecked heart shattered. Akiem did not know what love was. But then, did Zane? They had each other, in a moment that could be their last. He wanted to take this dragon away, but Akiem wouldn’t leave. He wanted to save Akiem in every way, but he could not save him from himself. That was love, wasn’t it? He’d die for this dragon.

“Yes.” Zane pulled him close, claspings his arms around him and holding on. “Yes,” he whispered against Akiem’s neck.

Akiem tensed and sucked in a breath, pulling back as much as Zane would allow, and then Akiem kissed him again, slowly, carefully, tasting, remembering.

“I will save you and them,” Akiem said, “and this pocket of peace in a world that would see you all bullied and abused for entertainment.”

Alumn, it hurt.

“Will you save yourself?” Zane whispered.

Akiem looked at him, seeing deep into Zane’s soul because he’d laid it bare. The dragon’s gaze unraveled him. He simply brushed Zane’s mouth with a kiss that tasted like goodbye.

Tomorrow, his dragon would face Luceran, and there was nothing Zane could do to stop him, so he’d make tonight and their love last forever.

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CHAPTER 33



Akiem

How COULD an elf light Akiem on fire like this? His hands found their way inside Akiem's clothes and scorched across his skin. His soft mouth was a tease of tongue and teeth, and Akiem fell into the taste of it. Both his hands swept around Akiem's waist, slid down his lower back, and sank inside his pants to cup his ass. The touch wasn't soft. His fingers groped, his arms pulled, and Akiem found he needed more of the elf clutched against him. The hard rod of his arousal brushed against Akiem's.

"Do you trust me?" Zane whispered, gently easing Akiem back against the wall.

The answer was easy, but why he'd asked had Akiem's nerves fluttering. "I do."

Zane leaned against the wall beside him, shielding Akiem from any curious glances in the crowd, and eased his hand inside Akiem's trousers, brushing his palm down the length of his erection, making him gasp. Zane's hand didn't stop there. He pushed deeper, sliding his fingers beneath Akiem's balls and lingering long enough to squeeze gently. Akiem swallowed and tilted back against the wall. Zane's intense gaze warmed his face.

Zane stroked a firm finger behind Akiem's balls, toward his rear. Akiem panted, coming undone. Pleasure crackled, and anticipation stole his breath.

This was... different. Unexpected. The finger probed and stroked, but stayed in that small valley, going no deeper.

Zane was intently focused on his face, reading every signal, every gasp. He leaned in and nipped Akiem's ear, then swirled his tongue around the shell.

"Do you want more?" he whispered.

Did he? He wasn't sure what Zane was asking, but he trusted him completely. He'd said he'd never hurt him. Akiem believed him. "Yes."

Zane adjusted his position against Akiem's side and reached lower. His firm finger slid back, gently circling over Akiem's hole. Countless shivers trickled down Akiem's back, and his arousal ached. Gods, he wanted more of that. A groan peeled free, and Zane responded by stroking faster. His forearm brushed up against Akiem's balls and occasionally stroked along his cock, delivering tiny bursts of friction that sent Akiem's mind spiraling.

Zane's warm, wet tongue traced Akiem's jaw and down his neck. His sucks and nips drove Akiem toward an edge, and then his finger dipped inside, massaging a maddeningly sensitive part. Akiem blew out a breath. He didn't know what this was, but it felt divine.

Zane angled closer. Akiem was too lost in pleasure to pay any mind to what Zane was doing. A quick tug on his pants jolted his hips, and Zane plastered himself close, his hard erection nudging alongside Akiem's. Zane took both in hand, his expert fingers finding new pleasurable highs.

Akiem was Zane's, body and mind. Vulnerable in Zane's hands but strong because of it, he could hardly make sense of it and didn't care to. To think he'd been shackled and imprisoned behind the wants and desires of others all this time, and now Zane freed him. He clutched a fistful of Zane's hair and pulled him into a savage kiss, never wanting to let him go. He'd do anything for this compassionate, gentle, thoughtful elf. Sacrifice anything. His love was as fierce and dangerous as the bronze in his veins. It frightened Akiem, but it lifted him up too, made him *better* than he'd ever been. Made him new—no, it exposed the truth and made him who he'd always been inside.

Zane had helped him discover who he really was beneath a lifetime of fear and lies.

Zane was a gift, one he could never repay.



HE LEFT Zane gently snoring in their bed back at the borrowed house and met Annie in the clearing. Mist crept between the trees, silencing the world.

“You know what to do?” Annie asked. She wore her scouting leathers, blending in seamlessly with the forest’s autumnal colors.

“I’ll need fifteen seconds. Give me that, and I’ll see it done.”

The elf nodded.

Zane had been clear that Annie wouldn’t think twice about sacrificing a dragon to end the king. Should it come to that, neither would Akiem. But fifteen seconds would be enough, if he dared to take them.

“May Alumn’s light be with you, prince.”

He turned away from her and shifted, then climbed through the mist, his wings stirring great clouds of it apart. The eastern edge of dawn brought the sun with it. Soon, there wouldn’t be any mist, and nowhere left to hide as he soared toward the compound and his fate.

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CHAPTER 34



Zane

ZANE GASPED AWAKE. He reached for his dragon and found cold sheets instead. Sunlight poured in through the window, mocking him.

Tomorrow had come.

He tore from the bed as fast as his wounds allowed and dressed on his way out the door. He'd find Jevan and they'd find Akiem, and whatever happened next, they do it together.

The cleanup from the party had all but finished. Scouts were returning from their morning patrols, and hunters had returned with freshly caught rabbit and deer. Life continued. But Akiem was missing, and so was Annie.

He knew where they were, or where they might be.

Jevan and Rosa had been invited to stay with a family overnight until more permanent lodgings were arranged. Zane knocked on the door. Jevan opened it, then continued to throw on his jacket before rubbing his hands together against the cold. He grinned. "Hey, you want some breakfast...?" The question trailed off as he read Zane's expression. "What's happened?"

Jevan had been through a lot. He had his sister back. He could put down roots and settle here. Maybe it was wrong to ask for his help. "You know, never mind..."

He left but Jevan was fast on his heels. "Zane, stop..."

Zane wasn't stopping. He had to get to the warehouse, to Akiem. Jev had family now, too much to lose.

"Zane, I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice—"

"I know." He glanced over. "It's not that."

Jev's pained expression slowed Zane's pace. For years they'd fought side by side and had each other's back. Zane stopped and faced his friend. He didn't need to say a word. Regret was written in the downturn of his lips and soft eyes. He blamed himself for everything—the elves who had died and the city that had burned. He needed a second chance. "Akiem and Annie have a plan to stop the king, and we aren't invited."

"They left you out? I mean, me... I get. But you?"

"You saw it, Jev. You saw it in him weeks ago. Akiem is determined to kill himself for our cause. He knows I'll try to stop him, so he left."

"Shit."

"You said not to fall for him, but I did, and... Shit, Jev... I know I've made the worst decisions in the past. I dragged you into my fuck-ups, but this is different. Akiem is different. I can't let him do this."

Jev's steady hand landed on Zane's shoulder and pulled him close. "Then we stop him. But are you sure you want me by your side?"

"Everything you did, I get it. She's kin. You love her. I'd have done the same." To protect someone he loved, he would do anything. He had that someone now, but for how much longer?

Jevan sighed. "I owe that black dragon more than I can ever repay. I'm with you."

Zane grabbed Jev and pulled him into an embrace.

"I'm sorry for everything," Jevan said. "For all those people who died..." He clutched Zane close.

"I know." Zane braced Jev at arm's length and held his too-bright gaze. "Let's both go make it right."

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CHAPTER 35



Akiem

DRAGON CALLS SCREECHED THE ALARM.

He flew in fast and true, sweeping low over the jagged tops of Bayston's old buildings. Mist lingered below, where the sun hadn't penetrated, covering the city streets like a pale river. Ahead, dragons circled and swooped above the compound. Akiem was still miles out, but the broken walls and the collapsed sections of roof of the compound were obvious. Luceran had torn through his court, reducing it to rubble. With luck, his killing spree might have taken out some of the other lords, further weakening the king. His rage would make him foolish and blind. Akiem counted on it.

More calls split the morning quiet as dragons climbed into the blush-red sky, so many that they gathered like thunderclouds.

But no diamond.

A swirl in the mist drew Akiem's gaze downward.

A thick layer of undisturbed mist lay in the streets ahead, but behind... something large churned the vapor. Something almost invisible among its whiteness.

Luceran breached the mist, arcing skyward, jaws open and claws extended.

With a cry, Akiem rolled, narrowly avoiding the jagged walls of an old human tower. The building whooshed by. Luceran veered around the tower and flew in Akiem's wake, streamlined like an arrow. Sunlight blazed off his scales. Vengeance burned behind his violet eyes, and low in his throat, he stoked his fire.

Good.

Akiem banked hard around another tower, slicing the air apart. His insides whooshed, and his heart pumped harder. Luceran roared, unleashing a wave of flame. Akiem tilted his wings and plunged beneath the flames and into the cool mist.

Buildings sprang up ahead, racing toward Akiem. He veered and swooped, pumping his wings harder, *faster*. Luceran's roar chased him. Close. He needed to keep him on his tail, but not too close. Luceran, in his madness, would follow him through the mist, but the others, those thinking, knew the narrow streets were too dangerous to fly through.

Up, over, and around. Down, under, and through. He threaded through the old city like a needle through fabric, tucking his wings in, tilting their edges, carving through the air, and whipping his tail for balance. On and on and on. Breathless. Racing. Faster.

Diamond flashed to his right.

Luceran slammed into Akiem's side. The blow knocked Akiem clean out of his flight. He skimmed a tower corner, but the next rushed up and slammed into him. Rock and darkness tumbled and roared over him. The pain only came once he'd blinked back into himself on the street, buried under tons of rubble.

Akiem shook his head free and pulled the rest of his bulk from beneath the rocks.

Luceran lay on the street too, unmoving.

He wasn't dead. His breathing stirred the mist near his nose.

This wasn't the plan he had devised with Annie, but what did it matter where the king died, as long as he did. Bloodlust trilled through him, voiced as a low growl. He stalked toward the fallen king. Luceran's head was turned away, the weak spot behind his crown exposed. Instinct strummed Akiem's desire to kill. It was all he could feel. His jaw ached. Saliva pooled as he thought of sinking his teeth into the king's skull and ending the abuse once and for all, abuse not just dealt to him by Luceran, but by all dragons.

Killing the king meant more than a single death. It would elevate Akiem above them all.

Bite, fuck, take, own. His needs beat alongside his thudding heart.

Akiem stalked ever closer to the king, watching for the tensing of muscle that would signal a strike.

Closer now, moving silently like the mist he carved through. He raised his head, bettering the angle at which to catch the king's head in his jaws.

Luceran jerked his head around. His tail lashed and slammed into Akiem's right side. The king rolled around to face him. Akiem drove in, aiming for his vulnerable belly. The king's jaws clapped together, inches from Akiem's snout. Akiem recoiled, summoned his fire, and blasted Luceran's face.

Luceran tore through the flame as though it were water. Teeth clamped around Akiem's neck, sinking through scale. Sparks of pain tore down his neck. His fire choked off. Akiem swung his head around and scraped his teeth down Luceran's shoulder, tasting blood and scale. He'd have gone for the wing, but he needed the king to fly, to follow... unless he killed him here.

Rage.

He'd always kept it buried deep, deep down in the darkest part of himself, because it was bronze and everything he hated, but he could feel and taste the metal in him rising. It screamed at him to take, to bite, to fuck, to own. *To destroy.*

Claws raked down Akiem's chest. He barely felt it.

He snapped at the king's wing, missing by inches.

No, no, he needed to think, to follow the plan. Rage was blinding. Rage would steal his thoughts and reason. He could not allow himself to fall into its promise and succumb to the madness of being bronze.

Akiem twisted away and whipped his tail around, slamming its spikes into Luceran's jaw. He didn't look to check the damage. The mist swirled and rolled, revealing a tower's base. He sank his claws into stone and steel and climbed the vertical façade. The old building groaned. Parts of it fell away and smashed somewhere below. Higher and higher. Luceran's flame chased him.

The mist fell away.

Sunlight warmed his wings.

He awkwardly clambered onto the roof, avoiding jutting pillars and spiked iron rods. The tower trembled beneath his feet.

Akiem peered over the side, and Luceran's snarling jaws greeted him with a snap, sending him scrambling backward. The king climbed over the side, hatred burning in his eyes.

Come for me, Akiem silently beckoned. Chase me like you've wanted since the beginning. Chase me now... until the end.

Akiem dropped off the building, flung out his wings, gritting his teeth against bruises and tears, and soared. Luceran followed.

The chase.

No dragon could resist and certainly not one enraged by his brother's beheading. Luceran's every breath and heartbeat sought Akiem's death. He was dragon.

Akiem flew above the mist now that they were farther from the compound, wings beating hard, lungs bellowing. Old scars burned. New wounds hissed. But he was fast. He'd always been fast.

The ruined city fell away, turning into the green crowns of forest trees.

Faster. Harder, he flew.

He could not survive a fight with Luceran, but he didn't need to.

He just needed to give the king what he wanted.



EVERY SCALE FELT MADE of jagged glass. Every wing beat cut them deeper. He bled from places he didn't dare think about. Every inch of him demanded he land and rest, but Luceran was gaining on him. Chasing was easier than fleeing. Luceran rode in Akiem's wake, conserving his strength, and by now he'd know where Akiem was going.

There was no turning around.

There hadn't been since Luceran had seen him.

When the chase ended, the king would be dead, whatever the cost.

Fear, anger, and the thrill of it all poured strength into Akiem's veins. The destination was close. He spotted the village's trails of smoke and veered right. Luceran cut closer, his snout almost on Akiem's tail, but the turn was important; it took Luceran away from the village.

Teeth punctured Akiem's tail.

A roar clawed up his throat and burst free.

Luceran angled his wings upward and yanked Akiem *down*. The world spiraled. Akiem stretched out his wings, trying to catch enough air to keep him aloft, but Luceran's weight pulled him down and down and down. Jagged autumnal treetops rushed upward. Dread clutched his chest. He thrashed, tumbling and dragging the king with him.

Luceran's wings snapped open. His teeth tore free of Akiem's tail, but it was too late. Akiem hit the trees, heard them shatter, felt their substantial trunks splinter against his spine. Then a sudden, choking silence throbbed around him, trying to wrap him up and drag him under. The instinct to move had him rolling onto his front. Growls rumbled through his chest and up his throat. He dug his claws into the earth, gripping roots to heave himself forward.

He'd fallen just south of the village. He had to get up.

The trap was still some distance away, hidden among the trees. He'd fallen too soon.

He smelled blood.

Lots of it.

Luceran's enormous wings whipped up a storm as he landed in the clearing Akiem's crash had hollowed out in the forest. He tucked his wings in, bared his teeth, and prowled forward.

Akiem kept his head low, but the growl that emanated from him was not submission.

Rage boiled his bronze blood, and for the first time in forever, he freed the bronze inside him.

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CHAPTER 36



Zane

THEY'D ALMOST MADE it to the buried warehouse when two dragons fell out of the sky. One black, one white. It was impossible to watch, but he couldn't look away. They tumbled and clawed, tearing off scale and opening vicious wounds. Then the diamond king regained control, but Akiem did not.

He plummeted and vanished beyond the tree line.

The ground thundered with the impact.

Jevan set off running at the same time as Zane.

The diamond king hung in the sky, surveying the trees, his gaze landing on the village before swinging down again to where Akiem surely lay, and then Zane lost sight of him. Shortly after, great world-shuddering growls and roars began.

Trees had fallen, and some appeared to have shattered. Wood and leaves were everywhere. Great wet splashes of blood soaked the fallen pines.

Horror held Zane rigid near the edge of the crater. The dragons fought with tooth and claw and wing and tail. They tore into each other, opening devastating wounds. Zane had never seen anything so monstrous. Akiem gave back everything Luceran landed, his bronze eyes alight.

Zane had no bow, just a small dagger he'd borrowed from a villager. Jevan had no weapon. They could not get between them, and even if they

did, the dragons wouldn't see them.

Akiem got his teeth around Luceran's throat and flung him aside. Swathes of forest were swept away beneath the king. Luceran rolled onto his belly and stalked around, never taking his eyes off the towering Black Prince.

In that moment, panting out purple flame, eyes burning bronze, Akiem had never seemed more kingly. Alumn, he was a monster, but he was Zane's monster.

Luceran stilled. He lifted his head and snuffled, tasting the air.

Akiem saw Zane then, somehow, among all the broken wood and branches.

"Shit, the king knows we're here!" Zane hissed, ducking back.

Luceran whipped his head around and stared straight at Zane with slitted pupils.

Run.

If he ran, he'd die.

Akiem struck fast, his jaws coming down near the back of the king's head, but Luceran twisted. Teeth clashed. Luceran clamped down on Akiem's lower jaw and tongue and shook his head from side to side.

"I can't ..." He stepped out of the tree cover.

"Zane!" Jevan grabbed for Zane and missed.

"Get to the warehouse! Get to Annie!" Zane called back.

"Are you *insane*!"

Maybe.

"Luceran!" Zane bellowed, raising his arms. "Remember me, you fucking lily-white lizard!"

The king spat his hold on Akiem's nose and whirled on Zane.

"He took your brother's head to save my life," Zane called. "Clarion died for an elf, for me!"

Fire boiled in the dragon's throat. He came closer, lifting his head, towering over Zane.

Zane couldn't fight him. No elf could fight a dragon.

But by Alumn, he could run. He could run so far and so fast that their plan might work.

After making sure Luceran had him firmly in his sights, Zane bolted into the trees. Seconds later, the dragon thundered after him.

CHAPTER 37



Akiem

LUCERAN WAS CHASING after *his* elf.

The warehouse.

Zane would get there first. He'd do what Akiem had planned to do.

Annie would see Luceran and blow the warehouse... with Zane inside.

Akiem staggered forward, one foot in front of the other. His right wing dragged. It didn't hurt. The pain was fading now.

He had to get to the warehouse.

He had to save Zane.

Bronze sizzled beneath his scales, demanding he move. The bronze in him did not suffer weakness.

The ground hardened, signaling the warehouse was beneath him. Ahead, Luceran disappeared into a gaping hole in the ground. The trap was set.

But Zane was in there too.

Akiem had told Annie fifteen seconds—the time he would have used to shift and take the stairs, slipping out seconds before the entire warehouse blew, burying Luceran inside.

Fifteen seconds or zero, if she wanted Akiem dead too.

He dragged himself and his wing, yipping as though calling Zane back to him. *Come back. For me.*

A blast of light blinded him first. Then the noise barreled into him, throwing him down into the dirt. His ears rang, thoughts rattling. Dust rained down.

A hole had opened in the ground where the warehouse had been. Only rubble remained.

Inside, buried under tons and tons of rock, lay Luceran and Zane.

Akiem clawed at the broken rocks, digging in search of the tiny body in the rubble, but the rocks were too big. He locked his teeth around them, dislodging some, but deeper down, the rocks had locked together. He couldn't break them apart.

Zane was inside.

Seconds turned into minutes into too long.

Grief tore out his weary heart, leaving him cold. He lifted his head and whined.

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CHAPTER 38



Zane

THE WAREHOUSE WAS FUCKING VAST. As Zane ran through it, he'd never felt smaller. His thighs burned, and his lungs did too. Then Jevan appeared from the doorway at the back, a longbow in his hand.

The dragon thundered behind Zane, gaining on him.

The ground shook, and the air boiled. Faster and faster. He had to get out before Annie flicked the switch.

Jev jogged forward, nocked an arrow, and raised the bow.

"Go!" he shouted, waving Zane past. He let his arrow fly.

Luceran screamed. At the stairs, Zane looked back. Fire strafed the ceiling. Concrete collapsed throughout the warehouse. Jev's arrow had found its target and taken out Luceran's right eye.

"Jevan!"

Jevan walked *toward* the enraged dragon. He nocked a second arrow and raised his bow.

"Come on!" Zane called.

Jevan knew about the explosives. He knew Annie was poised to hit the trigger.

The second arrow flew, puncturing Luceran's throat, right where the firepit boiled. Fire spilled out, choking the king. He coughed and wheezed, vomiting up liquid flame.

Jevan turned, sent Zane a smile and raised his bow in salute. “I’m making it right—”

Fire and rock exploded, consuming the diamond dragon and Jevan. The shockwave slammed into Zane. He made it to the top step, to Annie, when a second blast rolled over them, ripping away all noise and feeling. His cheek hit the floor, and rocks pummeled over him.

At least I saved one good dragon, he thought, and the world went black.



HE CRAWLED out of the dirt, wheezing up concrete dust. Annie swooped in and tucked him against her side. They stumbled out into the blazing sunlight.

Zane coughed and breathed, hands pressed against his thighs, then straightened and squinted into the settling dust. A huge depression had eaten the ground, carving out a bowl full of concrete.

Annie sat on a rock. “We got him?” She coughed.

None of the rocks moved. A tree groaned and toppled into the crater. Then stillness settled. “We got him.”

Zane shielded his eyes from the sun and searched the perimeter. On the other side, a black dragon lay still, his torn scales covered in dust and blood.

“Akiem!” Zane called, stumbling forward.

Akiem didn’t move.

Zane’s racing heart stuttered with dread. He broke into a jog, opting to go over the rubble instead of around it. He couldn’t run, the rocks were too uneven, so he climbed and jogged and stumbled across the warehouse’s remains.

Akiem couldn’t be dead, not after everything they’d been through.

As Zane clambered closer, he saw the blood, the broken scales, the bent wing. “*Alumn, you can’t have him!*”

No, he couldn’t stand it. It wasn’t fair. This wretched fucking world needed Akiem. It needed a good dragon. The elves needed him. More than all that, Zane needed him. Without Akiem, he’d be adrift. Alone. He needed that damn black prince as his anchor.

The ground groaned and *moved*.

Zane stumbled.

More rubble moved, grinding and puffing out dust.

The ground heaved. A diamond-covered wing lifted, the scales cracked and bloody.

There was nowhere to run.

The king's head rose out of the destruction, Jevan's arrow in his eye, but his other eye gleamed with vengeance and fixed on Zane.

Luceran's jaws parted, broken teeth exposed behind a snarl. He towered over Zane, a mountain of a beast.

He was too big, too much, but oddly, Zane wasn't afraid. He'd tried. He could have done no more, and now Akiem was dead. In the next few moments, Zane would be dead too.

It was over. For good.

The king opened his mouth wider and drew his head back, about to strike.

Zane closed his eyes and dropped to his knees.

Alumn, take my hand and guide me through the darkness.

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CHAPTER 39



Akiem

AKIEM THREW himself forward and struck. He opened his jaws, tilted his head, and sank his teeth into the weak-spot at the back of Luceran's skull. The king jolted and twitched and fell limp, dead in moments. It seemed almost too quick for Luceran, but Akiem knew death, and quick meant final. Luceran would never get back up again.

Akiem flung the body down, clamped his teeth into the diamond scales running down Luceran's throat, and ripped them off. Then Akiem dug his claws in, holding the dead king beneath him. He sucked air deep into his lungs and loosed a roar that shook the world. The king was dead. This was Akiem's land now, and these were his elves.

He'd watched, playing dead, after he'd heard Luceran breathing beneath the rocks. Zane had almost died—again. Akiem lowered his head and watched his tiny elf. He smelled like the woods and freedom and home, and Akiem brought his head in low, snuffling around Zane, wanting to be close without frightening him. He knew how he looked, vicious and bloody, but like always, Zane wasn't afraid. He threw himself at Akiem's nose and clung on, something like sobs making him shake against Akiem's scales.

Rosa pried Zane off. They exchanged a few hushed words, and then she cried, falling into Zane's arms.

Jevan was gone.

Akiem dragged his battered bones and numbed weight off the dead king and found a flattened piece of ground to curl up in. There, he basked in the sun and licked his wounds. Only when he was clean could he shift, and he wasn't ready for that yet. Maybe tomorrow... He hadn't ever let himself think about the future. He might have one now, with Zane, with elves.

The dragons would need discipline.

Akiem eyed the king's steaming carcass.

He'd need to deal with the diamond brood eventually.

Zane strode up to Akiem's foreleg and slid his back down Akiem's scales to sit against him. He pulled up his legs, propped his wrist on his knees, and dropped his head back. Bloody, dusty, his clothes askew, and his red hair a mess, he smelled like battle and tears. Akiem sniffed him, and Zane's lips danced around a smile. He wanted to lick, to make him better.

"We need to have a talk..." Zane began, squinting up at Akiem. "You live, or I die with you—those are my terms."

Akiem huffed and resumed licking a section of his foreleg where Luceran had clawed him. Terms of what exactly?

"And no more heroics or saving my ass. I have a reputation and you're making me look bad."

Akiem smiled inside, and the hollowness he'd felt at thinking his elf had died fast became a distant memory.

"I know you're already thinking about fighting all the leftover dragons until one of them gets lucky and kills you. That ain't happening. If you're going to fight dragons, you're not doing it alone."

Elves.

They were impossible.

Akiem yawned, hoping Zane took the hint.

Zane narrowed his eyes. "If you think I'm leaving, think again. I'm staying until you shift. If you don't like it, you can eat me."

The light in his eyes suggested he referred to a different kind of meal. Akiem rested his head beside his elf and closed his eyes. He huffed out a sigh, grateful for the feel of Zane's little hand on his cheek. Maybe it would be like this now, Zane beside him, watching out for him, reminding him who he really was. He liked that thought, and as the sun baked his scales and the smell of elf overwhelmed those of blood and dragon, Akiem wondered if he'd finally found freedom.

CHAPTER 40



Zane

ELVES FLOWED BACK INTO BAYSTON. Zane watched them from his perch low on Akiem's back as his dragon soared above the streets.

There were other dragons in the sky, but none mobbed them, not while Akiem carried the king's carcass in his claws.

Akiem landed among the compound ruins and unceremoniously dumped the king's cold body atop the rubble. Three days had passed since his death. Decay had warped Luceran's diamond beauty, revealing his rot.

Zane climbed off Akiem's wing and walked a safe distance away to allow him to shift.

Dragons spiraled down from above.

He and Akiem had talked about how this would go.

Zane rolled his shoulders. He was armed with a longbow and two daggers, but he didn't draw them. He sought Akiem's attention for reassurance.

Akiem nodded back, his face a mask of fierce determination.

Dragons landed all around and shifted, building in number. They eyed the king's bloated remains, recoiled at the stench, and then growled at Akiem.

Their gazes crawled over Zane. Behind them, Annie's village elves emerged from the broken buildings, their weapons stowed. She'd been

crafting bows on the quiet, and with no Luceran to punish them, each elf carried a bow and a blade. Few were warriors, but Annie had promised, given time, they would be. As much as Zane was wary around her, she got shit done. She nodded at him, proving she stood with him. Her hands stayed by her sides, near her daggers.

This was about peace, not war.

“This city belongs to the elves,” Akiem said, raising his voice. “Any who deny it shall suffer under me.” He spoke well, considering it wasn’t entirely true, but a bluff was as good as the truth if it held.

Mutterings upset the dragonkin crowd.

“If you wish to challenge me, know this: it is bronze you see in my eyes. My father was one of the first great metals, risen from the earth in our beginnings. Metal runs through my jeweled veins.”

More murmurs. They knew of the bronze and their brutality. Suddenly, the shadowy black prince Luceran had found on their shores had teeth.

“Clarion died because he hurt what is mine. Luceran died because he crossed me.” He paused, letting those words sink in. “This land is rich and there’s plenty for all. The elves will share their skills in farming and trade, but they do not work for dragons. They are not your tools, they are not your toys, and they are not your food.”

A dragon shifted and took flight, preferring to leave than live with elves. Another followed.

Akiem tilted his head. “Live here in peace, or war elsewhere. Just know I will protect every single elf in this city, and equally, I will protect you, my brood, should you need it. From this day forth, we break from the past and carve our future, one with elves and dragonkin coexisting.”

Zane eyed them. They seemed remarkably calm about the whole thing. Akiem had doubted Zane when he’d urged him to come right out and say it how it was, to start as they meant to go on.

He glanced at Akiem and shrugged. *See, dragons can be reasoned with.*

Then a dragonkin fucked up and sprang for Akiem.

Zane pulled his bow free, nocked an arrow, adjusting for his missing finger, and fired into the dragonkin’s heart, jolting him off his feet. He died right after hitting the ground.

Akiem raised an eyebrow. Zane’s actions said what words could not: don’t fuck with the elves or Akiem and they’d all get along.

The dragonkin grumbled their dissent, but with two dead dragons in front of them and a line of armed elves behind, none dared to attack. They likely would later, but Zane was staying beside his dragon. No more moving on. His heart was here, in Akiem's hands.

"Stay or go, but honor my words," Akiem finished.

The dragonkin moved off, some shifting, some walking. The lines of elves watched them warily. It would take time, but with work, they'd raise Bayston out of the ashes, working together, dragon and elf, to do it.

Zane wet his lips and asked too quietly for anyone to hear but Akiem, "How long will they fear you?"

"About a day." Akiem smiled like he relished the thought of unleashing the bronze in him again.

Zane smiled back, wondering if he had, in fact, unleashed a monster in the Black Prince, but a good one.

They stood atop the ruins of the king's court, dragon and elf side by side, watching the world shift toward good.

Maybe peace would stick, maybe it wouldn't, but with Akiem and the elves, there had never been a better time to hope for a brighter future.

Zane slipped his fingers into Akiem's, reminding him he wasn't alone. "Now, if I recall correctly, you paid for services not rendered..."

Akiem's bronze glare slid to Zane. Pleasure and anticipation trilled through him. The comment cut close to a sore subject, but Zane had always found it better to hang a lantern on these things than keep them in the dark. He winked, and his dragon smiled his private, priceless smile.

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EPILOGUE



Akiem

BRINY DOCKSIDE AIR salted his lips and dampened his face as he stared out to sea. A low full moon painted the inky surface gray. The ocean was calm tonight, perfect for low flying. He'd need to take to the wing soon and glide over the city. Zane said the elves liked to see him in the skies—their protector watching over them.

There would be more battles to win and dragons who disobeyed, and elves too. Annie, in particular, was one to watch. She behaved more like the elves Akiem had known back home. She was the type to inspire revolution. But they'd made progress, and it felt good. Warmth had filled that hollow, cold part of him. His mind was calm. The nightmares hadn't haunted him in weeks. It was almost too good to be true, too good for him, but he'd take it.

He rolled up a sleeve and admired the sweeping tattoos snaking up his arm. The interwoven black ink was intricate in its design, put there by Zane's steady hand. The marks didn't hide his scars, just changed them, made them beautiful. Another gift from an elf whose love knew no bounds.

His ears picked up the *clip-clop* of horse hooves, and then the soft breeze delivered the scents of horse and elf. His elf. Akiem's nose twitched. He looked along the dock and raised an eyebrow at Zane tying his horse to a post.

Akiem allowed himself a moment to admire the fine line of Zane's waist and ass, hugged in leather and leaving little to the imagination. Zane straightened, raked his fingers through his loose red hair, and tossed Akiem a look that said he knew where Akiem's gaze had roamed and he'd been soaking up every second of it.

He approached, adding a sway to his hips. The sweet smell of horse increased, and Akiem's mouth watered. "You smell like horse."

"Do I?" Zane flashed a mischievous smile. "Not everyone has wings to patrol the city."

He knew what the scent of prey did to Akiem and had deliberately ridden in on the animal to kick-start Akiem's instincts. Zane liked to play with fire, and he burned hot when he did. They spent the nights together, some days too, discovering each other over and over. Zane was relentless in his pursuit of pleasure, teaching Akiem all the right ways to love.

He sauntered up to Akiem's side but stayed an arm's length away. Moonlight touched his face, highlighting pale skin and the dash of freckles across his nose.

"Teone is helping Rosa organize the repopulation of the city. It's going well. Rosa is... She misses Jev..." He dropped his head. His friend's death had hit him hard. His hand went into his pocket, where Akiem knew he kept the locket, recovered from the rubble.

Zane caught Akiem watching and brightened. "They've invited us to dinner. I'll warn you now, Teone wants to ask about the whole shifting thing. I told her it's magic, but she wants to know the details. She's very persistent. She also talks more than I do. I said we'd be there, but I get it if you don't want to be interrogated all evening..."

Akiem listened to Zane's melodic voice, enjoying the pride that warmed him through while wondering when it would be appropriate to pull Zane into the shadows or shift and fly him back to their *home*, where he could bury himself in Zane's wicked pleasures for the night. "She can ask her questions."

"Dragonkin are still paying for *services* farther down the docks," Zane continued, losing some of his smile. "I know how you feel about it and made sure they saw me, but it'll take more than my presence to stop it."

Akiem cleared his throat, steering his thoughts away from the idea of devouring Zane where he stood and on to more important matters. "We must select a council, not a court. Your people will nominate and vote for

their council members, as will mine. Dragon and elf will draft new laws, and together, we'll police them."

Zane tilted his head, fixing Akiem in his sights, a shimmer in his eyes. "Do you think it's possible for dragons and elves to work together?"

Not long ago, he'd have said no, but he and Zane proved it was possible. "We won't know until we try."

Gods, Zane was beautiful, with lips meant for tasting and lashes that highlighted those curious elven eyes, but it was his kind and hopeful heart that Akiem loved the most. A soft heart that balanced the unyielding bronze in Akiem.

All the pain of his past, the endless torture, and the lies he'd told himself were all worth it to be standing here with this wonder of an elf beside him. Zane believed Akiem had saved him repeatedly, but he was wrong. There was no doubt in Akiem's mind that Zane had saved Akiem and continued to save him with every soft glance, every light touch, and every gentle kiss.

He loved the elf so much it hurt and frightened him. Looking out to sea, he wondered if this would last, or if fate would realize Akiem didn't deserve Zane and snatch him away.

Zane's three fingers threaded through Akiem's. He leaned close, smelling of horse and elf and freedom.

"Would you ever go back to your home?" Zane asked, staring out to sea too. There was a tightness to his words, as though he feared the reply.

"Never. My past is dead. My future is here, with you." He folded Zane into his arms and tilted Zane's chin up. Worry lingered behind his smiling eyes. He knew, the same as Akiem did, that the future would not be kind to a dragon and elf. Change did not happen overnight. Dragons would come and try to end the peace they'd created here, but together, they'd brought down a king. Together, they'd reclaimed a city. And together, they'd created true peace between dragon and elf. Change was coming, and whatever happened next, they'd face it side by side.

"You once asked me if I was looking for someone." Akiem brushed the tease of a kiss against Zane's lips and pulled back to admire the marvel on his face. This wild elf had done the impossible and captured Akiem's dragonheart, a heart he'd thought he'd lost long ago. "I found him."

Zane smiled, threw his arms around Akiem's neck, and pulled him into a savage kiss. Akiem's heart soared far and free. Yes, this was where he was

meant to be. It had taken him a little while to find his place in life, but now that he had, he planned on living it.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born to wolves, Rainbow Award winner Ariana Nash only ventures from the Cornish moors when the moon is fat and the night alive with myths and legends. She captures those myths in glass jars and returning home, weaves them into stories filled with forbidden desires, fantasy realms, and wicked delights.

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